

## The Impact of Using L1 for Teaching Grammar among Iranian EFL Learners

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### Abstract

The current study examined the effects of using L1 in teaching grammatical instruction on the Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 40 out of 50 EFL learners were selected through an Oxford placement test at Nasr Zabangostar Institute in Amol city. They were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. A pre-test of grammar was administered before the treatment. For treatment, the teacher explained the grammatical structures in their first language. In each session, one grammatical point was selected and taught in L1. In the control group, the grammatical points were taught in English as their target language. After treatment, a post-test of grammar was administered to screen the probable change. The result indicated that a significant effect on learners' grammatical accuracy and the performances of the experimental group in grammatical accuracy was better than the control group after they were given instruction.

**Keywords:** First language (L1); Second language (L2); Foreign language (FL); Grammatical accuracy; Grammatical instruction.

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### 1. Introduction

Language learning is a basic process and it owns different properties. One of those key properties is communication. A language is a tool for communicating, transferring information and messages and expressing attitudes and emotions. English as an international language plays a crucial role in politics, culture, and education. English is a primary language to communicate around the world. For achieving the properties of language and also being successful, it is necessary to learn and improve four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). For being competent in four skills, a learner should learn grammatical items and vocabulary sufficiently.

Accuracy is one of the primary features of grammar specifically and language learning generally in the use of target language. In this regard, grammar has a major and inevitable role in the process of language learning and teaching. Different researchers and scholars like as [Reber \(1989\)](#) mention that this feature has a significant role in communicating in language learning and should be taken into account. Previous studies in second/foreign language learning revealed that numerous investigators have attempted to figure out what kind of instructional methods and approaches can be better depending on the complexity or simplicity of language features ([Brown, 2000](#)). Learners' first language (L1) can be a tool in teaching grammar instruction. Different investigators pointed out the pivotal and central role of using L1 in the learners' comprehension, argue in favor of L1 use in the second or foreign language classroom as a strong strategy to accelerate language learning and teaching process ([Cook, 2001a](#); [Pachler and Field, 2001](#); [Swain and Lapkin, 2000](#)). The arguments in supports of using the first language in L2 instruction clearly inform that not only doesn't the use of the first language have a negative impact on L2 learning, but it can help students to improve the way they learn a second language. Although English is dominant in communicative language teaching, some research showed that L1 is used in many ESL classes ([Auerbach, 1993](#)). He proposed that, when native language is used in ESL classes, researchers, learners announce positive results. [Cook \(2001b\)](#) an advocate of the role of L1 revealed that "bringing the L1 back from exile may lead not only to the improvement of existing teaching methods but also to innovations in methodology" (p. 189). [Mattioli \(2004\)](#) proposes that "most teachers tend to have opinions about native language use, depending largely on the way in which they have been trained and, in some cases, on their own language education" (p.21). A study was conducted by EFL learners and their instructors in a Spanish context by [Schweers \(1999\)](#) to investigate their attitudes toward using the first language in the L2 classroom. He established that "88.7% of Spanish learners studying English interested in using L1 in the class because they believe it facilitates learning. L2 learners also desired up to 39% of class time to be spent in L1" ([Schweers, 1999](#)). [Burden \(2001\)](#) examined the attitudes of 290 students and 73 teachers at five universities. The finding revealed that both students and teachers believe the importance of L1 in explaining new vocabulary giving instruction, talking about tests, grammar teaching, checking for understanding and reposting the students.

One of the most widespread difficulties among teachers of foreign language in Iran is to find out the most proper way in teaching grammar to learners and L1 can be a positive role in language learning process in general and learning grammar in specific. The main purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of using L1 in teaching grammatical instruction on the Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

### 2.1. Grammar

Grammar is defined as “the entire system of a language, including its syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology” (Chalker and Weiner, 1994). Other definitions, often popularly used, include the structural rules of a language, but exclude vocabulary, semantics, and phonology. Butterfield (2008) defined grammar as the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given natural language (Butterfield, 2008). He states that educators often assume that this will provide the generative structure on which learners can build their knowledge and will be able to use the language eventually. For them, prescribed rules give a kind of security.

Based on Palmer (1972) view, the core component of a language is its grammar, and it should be of crucial interest to any smart educated person. It is right that acquiring specific syntactic distinguishes need a great deal of time even for the most proficient students. Therefore, a significant question is whether it is possible to facilitate learners' natural acquiring of grammar through instruction. Research results can be brought to bear on this question from various sources, for instance, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) Second Language Acquisition and Research. Paying attention to whether an instruction can assist students to learn grammar they would not have acquired on their own, some studies, however not clear, point to the value of the form-focused instruction to enhance students' accuracy over what normally transpires when there is no focus on form. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) suggests details in his Form, Meaning and Use. Moreover, Jingjing (2002) claims that there is the efficient impact of grammar instruction on the learners' ability in reading skill. Teaching explicitly is viewed as a major section of grammar teaching and it can be simpler if the pupils already have some comprehending of how their first language works (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

In the grammar-translation method (GTM) the foreign language teaching included basically of analyzing the grammar and translating written forms in to and out of the foreign language. The fundamental purpose of this method was to utilize the literature of the foreign language and enhance the intellectual mind, and grammar was so important in the learning process. In the grammar-translation method, it was important to learn about the forms of the foreign language. Grammar was taught deductively and explicitly, and grammatical paradigms should be committed to memory through drills (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Unlike GTM, within the direct method, a prominent tenet was that language basically is speech (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The native language should not be applied in the classroom, and this was different from the practice in the former grammar-translation method where the language utilized was basically the first language grammar in direct method is taught inductively, that is, the learners studied a grammatical phenomenon in a text, and formulated a rule from what they found in the examples given.

In the audio-lingual method, grammar was not taught explicitly, but grammatical forms were rather induced from the examples given (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Simensen (1998) states that “in the audio-lingually inspired approaches, grammar teaching consisted normally of pattern practice drills only, and had no explicit explanation of grammar. At the time this was usually called an implicit approach to the teaching of grammar”.

According to Newby (1998), in communicative grammar language is observed as a tool for communicating in real contexts. In this view, the role of grammar is the way in which it assists people to express particular kinds of meaning. Meaningfulness and contextual appropriacy are stressed, while formal correctness is given less prominence (Newby, 1998). As Newby (2000) states that communicative grammar brought benefits to the area of language teaching, but it failed to integrate grammar in a coherent way. The communicative grammar is directly related to communicative competence.

The application of the first language in foreign language class contexts is arguably in the foreign language classroom contexts. Advocates of the monolingual approach suggest that the target language should be the only tool for communicating, believing that the prohibition of the native language would maximize the effectiveness of learning the target language. Although some teachers believe that the application of the first language can be effective in acquiring new vocabulary items and elaborating complicated idea, comments, and grammatical rules. They contend that teachers who master the learners' target language have far more benefits over the ones who don't. In the following part, the monolingual approach and bilingual approach are taken into account.

Krashen (1981) as a proponent of monolingual approach has argued that students learn foreign languages following basically the same way they acquire their first language. Based on his view, the application of the first language in the learning process should be reduced. As a matter of the fact, many teachers believe that L1 use in EFL classes must be discouraged because of many reasons.

a) Use of the first language may become a custom that both students and teachers may resort to whenever a difficulty is encountered.

b) Sometimes, the first language may be misleading when learning the target language. In spite of the existence of universals governing language systems, languages differ more or less.

c) Using the first language in EFL classroom contexts hinders the provision of sufficient comprehensible input, a prerequisite for learning any language.

A lot of teachers have criticized the monolingual approach and they find that use of the first language in EFL classroom context is effective at different levels. Recently, Widdowson (2003) called this approach as an bilingual approach. The first language has long been taken into account as a lower language and a source of errors. This view is now being criticized because EFL teachers have become aware of the importance of L1.

## 2.2. Studies Done on Using L1 in ELT

Different studies have been conducted about the role of L1 in the process of language learning and specifically in grammatical learning. Ghaiyoomian and Zarei (2015) studied the effect of using translation on learning grammatical structures regarding Iranian junior high school students. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 62 students in grade three of junior high school were chosen by means of administering a researcher made pretest. The participants were divided into a control group and an experimental group. The experimental group received grammar exercises in translating some phrases and sentences from Persian into English related to the intended grammatical structures during the study period while the control group just did their textbook exercises. At the end, a post-test was given to the students and the mean scores of the two groups were identified. Using *t*-test revealed that the treatment had a considerable effect on students' language accuracy.

In another study, Arshad *et al.* (2016) studied the effect of utilizing L1 in an EFL context as a consciousness-raising tool on teaching grammar to the students at the beginner and upper-intermediate levels. For each proficiency level, fifty participants were selected based on Oxford Placement. Twenty-five participants in each proficiency level (the experimental group) received L1 treatment in teaching grammar, whereas in the control groups L1 was not used. The analysis of the data obtained from the post-test yielded contradictory results in different proficiency levels. The findings showed a marked improvement on the students' command of grammar at the beginner level; however, for the upper-intermediate level, no statistically significant difference was observed.

In the present study, the main purpose is to examine the effects of using L1 in teaching grammatical instruction on the Iranian learners' grammatical accuracy. To do this aim, the following research question and null-hypothesis were formulated:

RQ: Does using L1 have any significant effect in teaching grammatical instruction on Iranian learners' grammatical accuracy?

The research hypothesis was:

RH: Using L1 does not have any significant effect in teaching grammatical instruction on Iranian learners' grammatical accuracy.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, 40 EFL learners (male (N= 14) and female (N= 26)) at Nasr Zabangostar Institute in Mazandaran Province participated in this study. They were selected out of 50 learners through an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). After giving OPT, those who scored one SD above and below the mean were excluded from this study. The participants were at the intermediate level. The first language of all participants was Persian. They aged from 16 to 23. The sampling procedure was non-random and purposive.

### 3.2. Instruments

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to homogenize the participants' proficiency level. This instrument had 60 questions and it had three parts: vocabulary, grammar, and reading tests. The participants were allotted 30 minutes to answer the questions. The results were classified based on OPT ranking rubric. Grammatical pre-test and post-tests were the other instruments. Twenty multiple choice items about three grammatical structures (simple present tense, past-progressive tense and definite and indefinite articles) were determined to the participants for pre- and post-tests. Pre- and post-tests were different from each other. Both tests were teacher made tests. The tests were administered as pilot tests among 10 EFL to examine the reliability of these tests. In other words, the tests had been piloted on a similar group of students and the reliability of the tests was calculated. To calculate the mean and the variance of the test scores KR- 21 formula, the most practical, frequently used method of estimating reliability, was utilized in the present study. The reliability coefficient of the pre- and post-tests were 0/83 and 0/76 respectively which were based on Alfa Cronbach that indicates high and acceptable reliability coefficient

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure

To find a reasonable answer for the research question, the following steps are taken in the research procedure. Firstly, two classes of intermediate EFL learners at Nasr Zabangostar Language Institute were chosen by the researcher non-randomly. The number of the participants was totally 40 (N=40). As it was mentioned before, the learners were admitted at this level through a placement test by the Institute. Then the Oxford Placement Test was administered to homogenize the participants. The participants were divided into two groups: a) the experimental group; and b) the control group. The participants took a grammar pre-test to specify the current level of the subjects. Before giving intervention, three grammatical instructions have been selected (simple present tense, past-progressive tense and definite and indefinite articles) for teaching. For the experimental group, the teacher explained the grammatical structures in the L1. In each session, one grammatical item was selected and taught in L1. In the control group, the grammatical items were taught in English as their target language. After giving treatments, the grammar post-test was administered. The whole procedures were done in 5 sessions. This study was a quantitative study (quasi-experimental study). The design of this study was pre-test, treatment, and post-test. It attempted to find the possible effects of using L1 in teaching grammatical instruction on the Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy. For analyzing the data, an independent t-test was used. For doing this, the SPSS software version 21 was utilized.

## 4. Results

In order to analyze the data, first Shapiro-Wilk test of normality was carried out. Table 4.1 presents the results obtained from Shapiro-Wilk SPSS analysis. As it is clear from the table 4.1, the p values (sig.) of all tests are more than .05 which reveal that the data of all tests are normal. As the data are normal, parametric statistical analyses were used to compare the performance of the two groups. In this regard, independent sample t-tests were conducted.

**Table-4.1.** Tests of Normality

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre_test	.950	30	.167
Post_test	.950	30	.174

To investigate the hypothesis of the study stating “Using L1 does not have any significant effect in teaching grammatical instruction on Iranian EFL learners’ grammatical accuracy”, first, the descriptive statistics of the two groups in pre-test were presented. Table 4.2 shows the descriptive statistics of experimental and control groups’ performance on grammatical accuracy in pre-test. To see whether the difference between the groups is statistically significant, an independent sample t-test was run.

**Table-4.2.** Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre_test	Experimental	20	15.5333	1.99523	.51517
	Control	20	15.7333	2.05171	.52975

Table 4.3 indicates the result of independent sample t-test of the two groups in the pre-test. The p value (.789) in the sig (2-tailed) is greater than .05, so it can be stated that there was no statistically significant difference between the performance of experimental and control groups in the pre-test.

**Table-4.3.** Independent Samples t-test of Pre-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	.014	.908	-.271	28	.789	-.20000	.73894	-1.71365	1.31365
	Equal variances not assumed			-.271	27.978	.789	-.20000	.73894	-1.71370	1.31370

To see the effect of intervention on learners’ grammatical accuracy, another independent sample t-test was used on the post-test score. Table 4.4 presents the descriptive statistics of learners’ performance in post-test of grammar learning. As it can be seen in this table, the mean score of the learners after they received instruction in experimental group was 17.0 and in control group was 15.40. To see whether the difference between the mean scores of the two groups is statistically significant and meaningful, an independent-sample t-test was conducted on the scores of learners in their post-test.

**Table-4.4.** Descriptive statistics of Post-test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Experimental	20	17.0000	1.60357	.41404
	Control	20	15.4000	1.80476	.51599

The following table (table 4.5) shows the results of the independent-sample t-test carried out on the learners’ scores for post-test. As table 4.6 indicates, the sig value (2-tailed) for equal variances is .016 which is lower than the required cut-off of .05. Therefore, it can be said that using L1 had a significant effect on learners’ grammatical accuracy and the performances of experimental group in grammatical accuracy was better than the control group after they were given instruction. In this regard, the hypothesis of the study was rejected.



Table-4.5. Independent Samples t-test of Post-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	.419	.049	2.567	28	.016	1.60000	.62335	.32312	2.87688
	Equal variances not assumed			2.567	27.618	.016	1.60000	.62335	.32232	2.87768

## 5. Discussion

Based on the research question, according to the result of the t-test on the grammar scores for the intermediate learners, it can be concluded that L1 use as the tool of instruction for teaching grammar was quite effective. The finding of this study is in line with that of other investigators (Scott and De la Fuente, 2008; Swain and Lapkin, 2000) who studied the effectiveness of L1 in teaching a second or foreign language. In addition, it can be stated that using L1 increased learners' awareness in understanding the grammatical structures. According to Swain and Lapkin (2000), research into the incorporation of first language use in the teaching grammar has had a wealth of publications and findings to suggest. L1 is used as a rich source of linguistic knowledge with which any L2/FL learner is already equipped, and it does not appear logical to deprive language learners of applying L1 at the expense of exercising an English-only method. Cole (1998) proposes that L1 is most helpful at the beginning and low levels. If L2 learners don't have knowledge of the target language, L1 can be used for introducing the main differences between L1 and L2, and the main grammatical features of L2 that they should be alert of.

The findings of this research are also in line with Duff (1989) belief: "translation as a teaching technique can be used to help students learn a second language more thoughtfully and effectively" (p. 6). The result of this study support Cook (2000) idea who believes that translation is a *teaching technique* which can promote learners' accuracy as well as fluency. The results of this study also advocate Atkinson (1987) statement who introduces translation from L1 to L2 as a means of improving the accuracy of the newly learned structures: An exercise involving translation into the target language of a paragraph or set of sentences which highlight the recently taught language item can provide useful reinforcement of structural, conceptual and sociolinguistic differences between the native and target languages. This activity is not, of course, communicative, but its aim is to improve accuracy (p. 244). L1 can play a fundamental role as a consciousness-raising medium to introduce new grammatical structures and the basic differences between L1 and L2 grammatical features (Cook, 2001a).

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the results obtained from the statistical analyses in the study, it was discovered that the idea of the effectiveness of using L1 as a teaching instruction to improve a group of Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy was supported. Therefore, it can be concluded that translating from L1 to L2, can enhance learners' grammatical accuracy within the scope of those structures. Moreover, it can be claimed that using L1 can push learners to use specific structures accurately when producing utterances in the second language. This mental practice in transforming an idea from mother language to the second language helps the learner tackle the psycho-linguistic challenge they have to face in producing the second language in real life situations. As a matter of the fact, recently, there has been an enhancing interest into exploring the facilitative roles that learners' first language could play in the instruction of grammatical forms. In line with the prior studies, the results of the present study reached the conclusion that the use of the first language can be viewed as a positive instrument can be a facilitator in foreign language classrooms and also it can enhance their awareness.

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