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A SURVEY OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' OPINIONS ABOUT PROBLEMS IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: THE CASE OF VOCABULARY, GRAMMAR AND L1 USE IN LEARNING L2 SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is deemed to be a challenging task for Iranian adult learners of EFL. The difficulty in learning English might be attributed to numerous variables and factors. The purpose of this survey study was to address Iranian learners about the major sources of problem in learning English as a foreign language. A total of 90 adult non-English major university students at intermediate level of proficiency were screened by Cambridge Placement test and selected as the respondents of the study. A 10-item Likert scale questionnaire written in respondents' L1 (Persian) was validated and used as the major source of data collection. The respondents' perceptions about vocabulary, grammar, and switching the code in learning grammar and vocabulary were surveyed. The data collected from the questionnaire was triangulated by a semi-structured interview in which open-ended questions were used to elicit explanatory data about their opinions about vocabulary, grammar and code-switching. The results of the study revealed that Iranian intermediate EFL learners consider learning grammar as a significantly more challenging and less useful activity; in contrast, they regarded learning vocabulary as a more important and more useful aspect of L2; however, they maintained that learning grammar is of less use value in speaking and writing skills. Moreover, they argued those teachers' code-switching and use of L1 while teaching the complicated aspects of grammar can have a positive impact on their learning.

Keywords: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), L2 grammar, Vocabulary, Code-switching

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of problems and challenges in adult second language acquisition (SLA) in SLA and particularly EFL contexts such as Iran has attracted researchers' attention to extensive research on finding the sources of problems and developing foundations to eliminate such problems. It can be observed that the proficiency level of most university students in Iran is below the threshold level. Indeed, poor English proficiency might have negative impacts on the academic and occupational position of adult EFL learners. As a case in point, the majority of Iranian EFL learners at university level have difficulty in using English as a medium of academic communication. They also have a hard time learning English. This paper draws upon a survey for explaining and predicting the problems which Iranian EFL learners face. In fact, the present study focuses on learners' opinions about the challenging aspects of L2 acquisition.

Major Challenges in Learning English

L2 learners and teachers deal with different challenges in the process of L2 acquisition. One of the most challenging issues in instructed SLA is related to teaching grammar. Teaching grammar is one of the problematic aspects of L2 acquisition. In a similar vein, EFL learners find learning vocabulary as another demanding feature of L2 acquisition. In the following subsections, the issues of grammar, vocabulary and the contribution of code-switching will be briefly discussed.

The Challenge of Grammar Instruction in SLA

No area of second and foreign language learning has been the subject of as much empirical and practical interest as grammar teaching. The question of whether or not grammar should be taught has been persistently debated in the fields of language pedagogy and second language acquisition research (Mohamed, 2004). Swan (2001) comments on the contradictory nature of the beliefs about teaching

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grammar and asserts that "within this overall to-and-fro movement, rules and exercises describe their own epicycle. Sometimes practice is all right but rules are not; sometimes explanations are ok but exercises are sidelined; sometimes both are respectable; sometimes neither"(p. 203). Communicative approaches made a distinction between teaching language and teaching about language (Widdowson, 1990). However, they do not necessarily reject the importance of grammar in communication. Widdowson (1990) advocates a facilitative role for grammar in communication. He believes that teaching formal features of language does not inhibit learners if the features are conceived as regulative devices and there should be a trade-off between focus on form and focus on meaning. Indeed, so many experimental and quasi-experimental studies have been conducted on the efficacy of teaching grammar. However, in the present study, Iranian EFL learners were addressed and their attitudes about the role of L2 grammar in L2 acquisition as a problematic issue were explored. The following section discusses the issue of vocabulary acquisition in SLA.

Many adult L2 learners are uncomfortable about grammar because they've been frustrated by it in the past, and not without good reason, given the number of rules, their complexity, and all the terminology necessary to understand them. To complicate matters, there are probably more exceptions to the rules than there are rules. Comfort with the rules of grammar will make you a more fluent, confident writer, but if reading a rule doesn't help you, you may find it more useful to study the examples below.

The Challenge of Learning Vocabulary

Learning vocabulary is an essential part of mastering a second language. One of the most significant needs of EFL learners is to enhance their L2 vocabularies. The very fact that there are different dictionaries which are extensively used by first and second language learners attest to the significant role of vocabulary in a language no matter if it is first or second language. Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read and write (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Hence, a strong vocabulary will help EFL learners not only in reading comprehension but also in listening, writing, and speaking. Vocabulary learning is a complex and gradual process and different approaches may be appropriate at different points along the incremental learning process. However, the best means of achieving good vocabulary learning is still unclear. In this study, learners' attitudes about the significance of learning vocabulary and the impact of code-switching on vocabulary acquisition were surveyed.

Code-switching

Another controversial and challenging issue which is also related to teaching grammar is code-switching. In fact, the general issue of grammar instruction in this study was related to the role of code-switching. That is, since English is used as the medium of communication and instruction in most EFL classroom contexts, the contribution of switching the code from English into L1 (mother tongue) in teaching grammar is an under-researched issue. That is, some teachers might switch the code from English into L1 (Persian in the context of the study) to teach complicated and problematic morpho-syntactic aspects of L2 grammar. However, very few research studies have investigated the role and efficacy of code-switching in teaching grammar from EFL learners' perspective. Hence, the present study is aimed at surveying EFL learners' opinions and attitudes about the efficacy of grammar, vocabulary and the role of code-switching in grammar and vocabulary acquisition. Indeed, code-switching refers to a change by the teacher (or learner) from one language to another one. In this study, by code-switching, the researcher refers to a situation in which the teacher might intentionally shift from L2 (English) to L1 (Persian or any other language variety) in teaching a problematic grammatical structure. That is, since English grammar is complex and L2 learners may not understand the teachers' metalinguistic explanation about a specific syntactic or morphological feature of L2 grammar, the teacher might switch the code into L1 so that L2 learners can better understand him or her. The research problem addressed in this study is that it is far from clear whether code-switching can enhance the efficacy of grammar and vocabulary instruction or not. As a case in point, intermediate EFL learners might have difficulty understanding teacher's explanations in the L2; hence, it is hypothesized in this study that code-switching might benefit L2 learners in learning problematic aspects of L2, i.e. grammar and vocabulary.

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Code-switching might have been considered with respect to the social aspects of using language in the community; however, the pedagogical functions and values of code-switching in L2 classroom contexts is considered to be an open research question.

Indeed, code-switching can be used as a teaching technique in bilingual classroom settings in which both the teacher and the learners can speak the same first language or a national language. In other words, code-switching can be utilized when the teacher and learners know the same two languages or codes.

The Study

The present study was aimed at surveying the problems and challenges that Iranian EFL learners face. More precisely, the efficacy of grammar instruction and the contribution of code-switching with respect to grammar instruction were investigated according to Iranian EFL learners' perspectives. The following section mentions the research problem

Significance of the Study and Justification for the Study

The impetus behind the present study was to identify the challenges and problems of learning English in the Iranian EFL context. In doing so, the researcher delimited the survey on the controversial role of learning vocabulary, grammar, the role of L1 and code-switching in learning grammar and vocabulary. Since many EFL learners find learning English vocabulary and grammar as challenging aspects of SLA, the researcher addressed learners' attitudes about L2 grammar and vocabulary and the contribution of code-switching in these skills. Hence, the researcher elicited data from EFL learners about the role and contribution of code-switching with regard to its facilitating or debilitating role in learning vocabulary and grammar.

The results from this study might provide guidelines for EFL researchers and teachers on Iranian EFL learners' perceptions and attitudes about the challenging aspects of L2 acquisition with respect to the role of grammar and vocabulary instruction. Adult EFL Learners' perceptions and attitudes might shed light on the efficacy of teachers' code-switching in vocabulary and grammar instruction.

Research Questions

The present study was aimed at answering the following research questions based sample respondents' perceptions:

1. What are intermediate Iranian EFL learners' perceptions about the significance and justification of learning grammar?
2. What are intermediate Iranian EFL learners' perceptions about the significance and justification of learning vocabulary?
3. What are intermediate Iranian EFL learners' perceptions about the impact of teachers' code-switching in teaching grammar and vocabulary?

Participants of the Study

A total number of 90 EFL learners were selected from Azad University of Tehran (south branch) as the respondents of this survey.

Their age ranged from 18 to 27 and the average age of the respondents was 21. All of them spoke Persian as their first language and English as a foreign language. They were non-English major students at the intermediate level of proficiency.

Both male and female respondents were included in the study. The following table illustrates the characteristics of the sample participants of the study.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants of the study

Number of participants	Gender	Proficiency level	L1	Average age
90	Female& male	Intermediate	Persian	21

All the respondents had Iranian nationality. It should be noticed that the respondents were included from three intact groups. In other words, since the number of participants within one class was less than the desired number and some of them were eliminated from the study, the researcher had to select participants from three intact groups.

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Instrumentation
Different materials were used in the study to collect data. At the very beginning of the study, Cambridge placement test was used to monitor and check the proficiency level of the participants. It was an objective test which was developed, validated by Cambridge University. That is to say, the researcher need not check the reliability and validity of the Cambridge Placement test since it was already a validated and reliable test. This test has been extensively used by researchers around the world for placing learners into different proficiency levels and homogenizing learners within intact groups.

In addition to the objective proficiency test (Cambridge Placement test), a 10-item Likert scale questionnaire was used to obtain the respondents' perceptions and opinions about grammar, vocabulary, and the contribution of code-switching to learning these skills. The questionnaire was designed based on Likert scale.

It was developed in the respondents' L1 so as to ease their understanding of the items. In addition to the questionnaire which was used as the primary source of data collection, the researcher used interview to obtain explanatory and complementary data on the respondents' perceptions about grammar, vocabulary and code-switching.

Procedures
Screening the Participants: As the starting step, the researcher was required to establish that the selected participants were homogenous. That is, they were adult EFL learners of almost the same age, the same L1 and academic background. The results of the given proficiency test were statistically analyzed. Accordingly, outliers were eliminated from the study. Accordingly, all the respondents were intermediate learners of EFL.

Checking the Reliability and Validity of the questionnaire: the questionnaire used in the present study was designed and developed in the respondents' L1 (Persian).

It included 10 Likert-scale items about the difficulty and significance of grammar and vocabulary and the role of code-switching. Firstly, the original questionnaire developed by researcher was piloted on fifteen advanced EFL learners who were identical to the target respondents of the study.

Since it was expected that intermediate respondents might have difficulty understanding and responding the questionnaire in English, it was written in Persian (the country's official and academic language); then, it was pilot tested on fifteen intermediate learners. Feedback was obtained from EFL experts on the wording of the items and their suggestions were taken into account. In addition, researchers examined the reliability and validity of the data collection tool.

The completed questionnaires by the pilot participants were coded and converted into electronic form in the SPSS software. Cronbach's alpha was used for checking the reliability of the questionnaire. The questionnaire included items on the following constructs:

- Grammar
- Vocabulary
- The significance of code-switching in vocabulary and grammar learning

Cronbach's alpha for the whole questionnaire was tested which reached 0.77. When responding to Likert questionnaire items, respondents were asked to specify their level of agreement to a statement. Once survey data were collected from the respondents, the next step was to input the data on the computer, do appropriate statistical analyses, interpret the data, and make recommendations pertaining to our research objectives.

The completed questionnaires were edited; invalid and inaccurate questionnaire responses were eliminated from the data to be analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results
In order to summarize the data of the questionnaire, the researcher calculated the response frequencies and the percentages for each question. Table 2 depicts the participants' responses to the questionnaire items and reveals the following aspects of interest.

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Table 2: Response frequencies and percentages for questionnaire items

	Responses Frequency				Response Percentage			
Item	Completely agree	agree	disagree	Completely disagree	Completely disagree	disagree	Agree	Completely agree
1	31	50	7	2	35%	55%	8.3%	1.7%
2	7	10	52	21	19 %	48 %	20 %	3%
3	50	21	10	9	5%	15%	28%	52%
4	55	20	8	7	12%	8%	28%	50%
5	60	25	4	1	1.5 %	6.5 %	35%	57%
6	28	52	7	3	5%	10%	60%	35%
7	58	18	13	7	8%	12%	23%	57%
8	8	15	42	25	30%	50%	15%	5%
9	35	41	10	4	5%	12%	43%	40%
10	5	12	43	25	30%	47%	15%	7%

(See appendix 1 for the list of items of the questionnaire)

Based on questionnaire data, the respondents considered vocabulary to be as highly useful in all the skills. Item 1 mentioned *there is a significant relationship between vocabulary learning and the ability to communicate in English*. According to learners' attitudes, 25% checked the option *I completely agree* and 55% of the respondents *agreed* that there is a relationship between the learning the meaning of a word and ability to communicate.

Item 2 elicited the respondents' perception for the role of grammar *in L2 acquisition*. Indeed, 48 % of the respondents disagreed with this statement; that is, this percentage of the sample respondents believed that they do not need grammar for speaking and writing in English. 19 % of the respondents completely disagreed with the belief that grammar is of significance in communicative skills. 20 % of them agreed with this statement whereas 13 % of the participants completely agreed that grammar is of significance in L2 acquisition. That is, the majority of participants believed that grammar is not that much important for learning L2.

Item 3 elicited the idea from the participants on the problematicity of learning grammar As it is mentioned in the table, 50 % of the participants completely agreed that learning grammar is difficult and challenging. 30% indicated that learning grammar is difficult.15 % disagreed and 5 % completely disagreed.

Item 4 was intended to check whether learners consider L1 use to be useful in learning grammar and vocabulary. According to the results, the major tendency (61%) in their opinions was that L1 should be used in learning grammar and vocabulary.

Item 5 surveyed the respondents' about the justification and usefulness of code-switching in learning grammar. A majority of the participants (52.12%) completely agreed and also 35% agreed with this item. That is, they believed that teacher's code-switching from L2 to L1 can facilitate the process of grammar acquisition for them while teaching grammar.

According to item 6, participants believed that using L1is also useful in learning the meaning of new vocabulary. Like the previous item, some 35% completely agreed and 60 % agreed that L1 should be used in learning vocabulary.

Item 7 was related to the difficulty of learning grammar. Indeed, 57% of the respondents agreed that learning grammar is challenging and difficult and 23% completely agreed that learning grammar is difficult. Item 8 mentioned that learning vocabulary is difficult. However, the majority of respondents disagreed with this statement. Unlike their attitudes towards grammar, they disagreed with this statement.

Furthermore, item 9 was intended to examine learners' opinions towards grammar learning. The majority of respondents (65%) agreed that grammar learning is not an enjoyable task. Item 10 explored their attitude toward vocabulary learning. Unlike their attitudes towards item 9, they agreed that they enjoy learning vocabulary.

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To sum it up, it should be argued that although a survey of learners' attitudes and preferences on the use of code switching and L1 in learning grammar and vocabulary is not enough in understanding the theoretical validity of vocabulary and grammar acquisition, the results of this survey can give some insights about the learners' point of view. Indeed, despite the fact that the participants did not have overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards learning grammar and they regarded *vocabulary* as more important and helpful than grammar, they maintained that *sometimes* it can help them in L2 writing and speaking. Indeed, this study can be only considered as a starting step for researching the validity of surveying learners' attitudes towards the contribution of code-switching in second language vocabulary learning.

Discussion

In this study, the researcher gave the tribune to Iranian EFL learners to air their attitudes and opinions about the significance, justification and difficulty of learning grammar and vocabulary. The majority of respondents contended that learning grammar is of high significance for the entire process of L2 acquisition. However, they mentioned that they were unwilling to learn grammar. They consider grammar learning as a difficult and less useful activity. In contrast, they believed that leaning vocabulary can help them better communicate in English.

Another finding of the study was related to code-switching and the use of L1 in learning vocabulary and grammar. The respondents of the study argued that code-switching can ease the processes of learning vocabulary and grammar for them. They mentioned that L1 can be used by the EFL teacher in explaining the complicated features of grammar and the meaning of new vocabulary.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher surveyed Iranian intermediate EFL learners' opinions about the challenging aspects of L2 acquisition. All the respondents agreed that learning grammar was a problematic aspect of learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, they welcomed the use of L1 and code-switching as a useful technique and device for facilitating the learning process of grammar and vocabulary.

In this survey, the researcher elicited data from intermediate EFL learners; nevertheless, as a direction for further researcher, interested researchers are recommended to survey advanced EFL learners' opinions. That is, a cross-proficiency study comparing the opinions of advanced as well as intermediate EFL learners can give a comprehensive picture of learners' attitudes and opinions about the sources of problems in the process of L2 acquisition.

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