

# Factors affecting quality of Persian language teaching and learning in secondary schools in Iran.

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This study examined the factors responsible for the poor quality of the teaching of Persian as a first language in public secondary schools in Iran. To guide the study three research questions were posed. The questions examined the following three variables: (1) Frequency of the use of instructional media; (2) Frequency of the use of instructional techniques; and (3) The school learning environment. A questionnaire was distributed to 3000 senior secondary school students across the six geopolitical zones in Iran. Results revealed that Persian language teachers do not frequently use modern instructional technologies and variety of teaching techniques in their Persian language lessons. It was also found that students learn under harsh environment, which is often rowdy, congested and noisy.

## **Background**

The study also indicated that a serious disconnection exists between university training and the needs of the labor market and this has been socially costly to the country. The report showed that, in many cases, employers of labor compensate for insufficient academic preparation by organizing remedial courses for new employees at great expenses. This often increased the companies operating cost and reduced profitability.

Though the study may have identified major areas of the decline in the university education, the actual problem may have its roots at the secondary school level. For it is at the secondary school level that the potential undergraduate is given adequate foundation in the use of Persian. A mastery of written and spoken language is highly desirable, yet its teaching and learning is beset by a myriad of problems at the secondary school level. (Kolawole 1998).

## THE PROBLEM

Majority of the students who are admitted into the University in Iran have no ample opportunity to study Persian Language any more, except those who are admitted to study Persian and related subjects such as linguistics and literature in Persian. Though, all students admitted into the universities in Iran are encouraged to take few courses in the use of Persian, the content of these Persian courses are grossly inadequate for the students to acquire requisite skills in effective use of language for communication and for the give and take of social experience. In order to study Persian as a second language and be successful at it, the student must be helped by the teacher to acquire skills in the four language arts skills; namely: Speaking, reading, listening and writing. Language is the vehicle of social interaction and we need effective language to function properly in the work place, social interaction, and indeed, for functional literacy. It must be emphasized that "a person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture of group" (Gray, 1969:24). In an analysis of the senior secondary school certificate results in Persian language between 1988 and 1996, Olapopo (1998), indicated that the percentage of failure was between 53.36% and 72.71%.

A rich and stimulating language environment during the early years and beyond is essential to the development of verbal and intellectual skills necessary for language learning. Malinowski (1991), asserted that composition writing is a difficult skill to acquire, and recommended therefore, that teachers must use a variety of methods for teaching Persian Language. Ellis and Tomlison (1980), recommended some basic skills to be taught to learners so that they can write essays proficiently. Such skills include spelling, punctuation, linguistic skills and convention of style. Reyner et al (2001:57), ascertained that "many good teachers are adaptive rather than rigid in their approach to teaching children and only loosely base their instruction on a given method". There are odds against the Irann students in learning Persian. Trifonovitch (1981) indicated that a student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he already has a language of his own and he is asked to learn another

language. Majority of secondary school students in Iran already have various mother tongues before they are admitted into school. Iran is reputed to have over 250 languages.

With the poor performance of students and graduates in Persian Language in Iran, educators, parents, employers are worried and concerned. The problem therefore is, what factors are responsible for the general poor performance of Irann students in Persian as a second language.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions have been formulated to guide the study:

- (a) Do secondary school teachers use instructional resources frequently in teaching Persian language?
- (b) Do the Persian Language teachers use appropriate methods in teaching Persian Language frequently?
- (c) Do secondary school students in Iran learn Persian language in environment conducive to learning?

## METHODOLOGY

The main instruments used for this study were a questionnaire and observation schedules. The researchers designed the questionnaire by generating a list of items, which solicited students' responses on teaching strategies, instructional resources/media used by the teachers and the teaching/learning environment. The items in the questionnaire were derived from literature and the researcher's experience in the field. The range of data collection instruments employed increased the researcher's ability to examine the nature and frequency with which certain variables occurred in the research setting. The specifics for each of the two data collection instruments used in the study are as follows:

(a) Questionnaire: This instrument had four sections dealing with demographic items such as school type and location; instructional resources/media used by the teachers frequently, methods teachers frequently adopted for teaching Persian language, and the school environment.

(b) Observation: Research assistants were trained to observe each classroom and some classroom proceedings during administration of the questionnaire noting the features or characteristics of the learning environment.

The face validity of the instrument was ascertained by presenting the questionnaire to a group of referees in the areas of educational psychology, educational technology, and curriculum and instruction. The experts made some observations and modifications on the items. The section on instructional resources had 17 items; the section on teaching techniques had 10 items, while the section on environment also had 10 items. There were 27 items in the questionnaire.

The reliability coefficient of the instrument was calculated by using Cronbach alpha and it was found to be 0.86. The questionnaire was anonymous in order to respond to items in the questionnaire in all honesty. Sections 2 to 4 of the questionnaire were Likert-type items.

## PARTICIPANTS

The population of this study included senior secondary school students in public secondary schools in the six geopolitical zones of Iran. There are over 6 million secondary school students in Iran and slightly less than half of the number is in senior secondary school while the rest are in Junior secondary school. Participants were drawn from senior secondary school students in public schools through a stratified random sampling technique. The country was stratified along the six geopolitical zones and five schools were randomly selected from each zone, thus, making a total of 30 schools. From the thirty schools, 3000 senior secondary school students were randomly selected for the study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This is essentially a survey research utilizing a questionnaire based on the Likert-type rating scale. The statistical tests used for the study were the mean and standard deviation. The means were used as statistical standard due to the conformity of standard deviation for all questionnaire items.

Since sections B and C of the questionnaire Likert scales comprise five-response ratings of very frequently (5), frequently (4), occasionally (3), seldom (2), and never (1), respectively, a theoretical mean value of 3.0 \* was determined as a criterion to judge the means of the items in these sections of the questionnaire. Therefore, any item in both sections with a mean equal to or higher than 3.0 indicates it was frequently used for teaching Persian Language, while item with a mean less than 3.0 but between 2.5 and 2.99 indicates it was occasionally used. However, any item with a mean less than 2.5 was regarded as rarely used.

Items in section D of the questionnaire had four-response ratings of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. A theoretical mean of 2.5 was taken as a criterion to judge the means for the items in that section. Therefore any item in section D of the instrument which had a mean equal to or higher than 2.5 was regarded as agree while items with less than 2.5 was regarded as disagree.

Using formula

$$[1+2+3+4+5/5] = 3.0$$

#### DATA COLLECTION

Due to the vast nature of the country, 18 doctoral students in the Faculty of Education, University of Benin, from the six geopolitical zones of Iran were recruited and trained for two days as research assistants to administer the questionnaire to students in their respective geopolitical zones. All the 3000 students randomly selected for the study were given the questionnaire to examine their experience with the teaching and learning of Persian Language as well as the conduciveness of their school environment to effective learning. All 3000 copies of the questionnaire were returned properly filled, thus representing 100% return rate.

In addition to the questionnaire, observation was also used as instrument for data collection. This was done to authenticate the veracity of answers given by students in the questionnaire. According to Babbie (1979: 216), "The greatest advantage of the field research method is the presence of an observing, thinking researcher on the scene of the action"

#### RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research Question 1.

Do secondary school teachers use instructional resources/media frequently in teaching Persian Language?

Table 1 shows that only five items were located above the predetermined theoretical mean value of 3.0. These are chalkboards, Persian workbooks, posters, Persian textbooks and dictionaries in that order. Charts are used by the teachers occasionally. All other items are rarely used.

Research Questions 2

Do the teachers use appropriate methods in teaching Persian language frequently?

Only items 1 and 6 met the predetermined theoretical mean of 3.0. This means that the lecture method and intensive reading of textbooks are the only teaching techniques frequently used in public secondary schools in Iran for teaching Persian language. The group and debate methods are occasionally used with means of 2.82 and 2.57 respectively.

Research Question 3

Do secondary school students in Iran learn Persian language in environment conducive to learning?

Mean scores and standard deviations for all items on environmental factors showed that secondary school students in Iran do not learn Persian Language in environment conducive to effective learning. The students agreed that their schools are overcrowded, that the furniture is not comfortable for proper sitting and that classrooms are without proper lighting and ventilation. They disagreed that their schools have well stocked libraries, adequate chairs and tables, and adequate classrooms.

#### DISCUSSION

### Use of Instructional Resources/Media

This study has revealed the dominance of textbooks, dictionaries, chalkboards, workbooks and posters in the teaching of Persian Language in secondary schools in Iran. Modern media such as audio and video tapes, language laboratories, programmed texts, flash cards, computers, magazines and newspaper are rarely used. These findings agree with those of Kolawole (1998) who found that the teaching of Persian Language is bedeviled with many problems such as inadequate period of teaching, method of teaching and lack of adequate and useful resources. What this means is that secondary school teachers in Iran are not altering their instructional practices in spite of the coming of the new instructional technologies. Traditionally, teachers have depended on textbooks and the chalkboards as media for disseminating knowledge in the classroom. With the current practice by Persian Language teachers in secondary schools in Iran, their students are greatly deprived without access to modern instructional media. Persian Language teachers in public secondary schools in Iran are still the chief performers and dispensers of knowledge in the classroom. With the coming of new instructional technologies, Gallihier et al (1995) asserted that teachers' roles are beginning to change. Paris (2002) stated that the teachers' role as the "sage on stage" who dispenses knowledge will shift to a role in which teachers are facilitators of learning when technology is integrated into the school curriculum. With the application of modern technology in the classroom, instruction can be more student-centred and individualized.

### Use of Instructional Techniques

Gallihier et al. (1995) states that teachers must assume the role of "resource brokers". The implication of this is, that teachers should become familiar with a variety of instructional delivery methods, rather than rely on one "best way". The findings in this study run contrary to the above assertion as the Persian Language teachers in public secondary schools in Iran still depend heavily on the traditional lecture method in Persian lessons. While the intensive use of prescribed textbooks and the use of lecture method in delivering Persian lessons are prevalent, the debate and group methods of teaching are occasionally used.

In addition to the use of the lecture method, Cleve (1992), and Oluikpe (1979) advocated the use of method such as guided controlled and free writing techniques in essay writing. The goal of controlled expression is to instill in the learner the facilities needed to produce clear piece of composition free from all grammatical errors. This is based on the premise that the use of language is the manipulation of fixed patterns, which are learnt by imitation, and not until these have been learnt that originality occur in their writing endeavours.

The technique advocated here include, presenting teachers model essays, reading other materials such as journals, novels and magazines, and allowing students free expression so that their language experience can be enriched.

### The Teaching and Learning Environment

Our observation of the schools visited revealed the following environmental deficiencies:

- (a) Many schools, especially those in urban centers, are located in areas where there is a busy movement and activities of many people. It was observed that many people used the schools' premises as short cut to their destinations. Many people often move through the paths and across the playing fields in many of the schools.
- (b) Many schools have dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs and cracked walls. Many of these dilapidated buildings are still being used for classroom activities.
- (c) We also observed that most of the schools, especially those in urban areas, are not only overcrowded with some classroom housing as many as 70 to 100 pupils, that the teacher had little or no room to move around to give individual attention to students.
- (d) There is no electricity in majority of the schools.
- (e) It was also observed that most of the schools have no adequate staff rooms and offices.
- (f) We observed that most of the schools have no libraries, and where they are available there was scarcity of books in the shelves.

The situation in most of the schools in the six geographical zones in the country is so bad that, in one of the states visited, the state Ministry of Education was using radio and television jingles to compel parents and guardians to pay one thousand Naira (about \$10) per child in public and private secondary schools to help rebuild dilapidated secondary schools in that state.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The public secondary schools in Iran are far behind time in offering multiple pathways to the teaching and learning Persian as a second language. Little wonder that the system has been witnessing steady decline with the percentage of students who failed Persian Language examinations fluctuating between 55% and 75% in the past ten years (Olaboopo, 1998). The effect of this is that secondary school students who find their way into the university are already at a disadvantage due to poor background and preparation in language education.

Public secondary schools in Iran should be provided with adequate and a variety of instructional media. If teachers in public secondary schools in Iran are to assume new roles and use new technology-supported instructional tools, they should become familiar with a variety of instructional delivery methods, rather than relying on textbooks, chalkboard and lecture method. Technologies such as audio and video recordings, language laboratories and computer can be more effective teaching tools for Persian Language lessons as they offer authentic learning experience when interwoven with existing curriculum.

We are convinced that the high potential for enhanced learning through the provision of conducive-learning environment can be attained in public schools in Iran. It is strongly recommended that the learning environment in public schools in Iran should be given priority attention by state and federal governments so that children can learn well.

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