

Iranian EFL Learners' and Teachers' Attitudes towards the Contribution of L1 in Learning English Vocabulary

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Abstract

This study tries to find out students' and teachers' attitudes toward the use of L1 in English language institute classes. To reach this goal, the researchers used a mixed method research design. Two groups of participants attended this study. One group consisted of 35 EFL intermediate learners and the other group consisted of 35 EFL teachers. The proficiency level of the learners was determined using English Institute placement test. The quantitative data were collected through two different questionnaires, i.e. one for teachers and the other for learners; the qualitative data were collected through teachers' interviews. After the data collection and analysis, the results showed that there was no statistical difference among learners' and teachers' attitudes towards using L1 in their English classrooms and both learners and teachers had similar positive attitudes toward utilizing L1 in their English classes. Furthermore, teachers of this study rejected the English only policy application in their English classes; learners were also satisfied with using L1 as a strategy to learn English vocabulary.

Key words: First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), students' attitudes, teachers' attitudes, English vocabulary learning

1. Introduction

Using learners' mother tongue or first language (L1) in second language (L2) classroom has been always a contradictory debate among researchers and language teachers. Some say use of L1 gets in the way of learning L2 and they assert that it also prevents the learners from internalizing the L2 valuable input (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Polio & Duff, 1994).

On the other hand, some believe that using L1 can increase comprehension and learning of L2 (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Cook, 2001; Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002; Levine, 2003; Mart, 2013; Pablo et al., 2011; Swain & Lapkin, 2000), and it can also be used in teaching new vocabularies and difficult grammar (Crawford, 2004; Pablo et al., 2011, Tang, 2002). Accordingly, many researchers believe that L1 can be used for comparative analysis of both languages (Dickson, 1996; Mart, 2013; Pablo et al., 2011), i.e., it is effective for learners' language development in the way that use of L1 allows them to see differences and make comparisons between their L1 and the L2 when teaching about grammar and vocabulary. This shows that many teachers believe the learners' first language is beneficial for teaching grammar and vocabulary. Of course, most of the teachers and researchers agree that elementary and intermediate learners may need more use of L1, because, these learners have no or little knowledge about L2, but, judicious use of L1 for advanced learners is also beneficial. (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Cole, 1998). It can also motivate students and reduce their anxiety and in this way, help their better learning (Levine, 2003; Pablo et al., 2011). Although there are a number of studies on the use of L1 in EFL classroom, it is still a debate, so, more studies in different contexts and with different learners prove to be beneficial. This study tries to investigate the learners' and teachers' attitudes toward the role of L1 in the L2 classroom in Iranian EFL context. Three main research questions were asked for this aims:

- 1: What are the Iranian learners' attitudes towards the use of Persian language for English vocabulary learning?
- 2: What are the Iranian teachers' attitudes towards the learners' use of Persian language for English vocabulary learning?
- 3: Do Iranian teachers and learners have the same attitudes towards the use of Persian language in English vocabulary learning?

The findings will shed light on learners' and teachers' points of view on first language usage in the English classroom and can have some impact on second language vocabulary teaching in L2 classrooms.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Arguments against Using L1

Using L1 may have negative effect on learners' learning process as it reduces the learners' exposure to the L2 and decreases their opportunities for using the target language; some researchers argue that L1 should not be used in L2 classes (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002; Polio & Duff, 1994). Since learners acquire the L2 through the same way they acquire their L1, it should not be used in the L2 classroom in order to increase learners' exposure to the L2 (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Ellis (1994) believes that L1 does not have any critical role in EFL teaching and too much use of L1 may prevent learners from receiving the valuable input in the L2.

Interference from the mother tongue is another argument made by researchers against the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. According to Cook (2001) and Richards & Rodgers (2001) to avoid interference which can make difficulty in the L2 learning, L1 should not be used. Auerbach (1993) states that learners can learn faster if they were exposed more to L2; as they will internalize it and begin to think in L2 by hearing and using it. By overusing L1, some learners may also assume the wrong habit of word by word translation technique (Harbord, 1992).

Despite all these arguments, some teachers and researchers believe in the positive and facilitating role of L1 in L2 learning.

2.2. The Facilitating Role of Learners' L1

Using L1 in L2 classroom has been accepted by some researchers as a useful technique, so, they have tried different ways of L1 application into L2 teaching efficiently. Harbord (1992) came to three reasons for using L1 in the classroom: facilitating communication, facilitating teacher-student relationships, and facilitating the learning of L2.

L1 is often used in elementary and intermediate English classes to instruct the learners how to do things, explain meanings of words, and describe complex ideas and complex grammar points (Tang, 2002). . The use of L1 with novice learners has proved to be a useful technique in increasing students' understanding and comprehension. One other reason for teachers to use L1 in their L2 classrooms according to Harbord (1992) is to form a natural relationship with their students. Students ask their teachers easily with no obstacle and so, the communication become easier for both teachers and students (Nation, 2003; Turgut & İrgin, 2009). Macaro (2009) defined the suitable use of L1 as one in which use of L1 in communicative classrooms can improve second language acquisition better than L2 usage. Swain and Lapkin (2000) believed the use of L1 is an important cognitive tool which can enhance L2 learning and denying the role of such a tool in doing linguistically and cognitively complex tasks is disregarding its importance.

Some researchers including Mart (2013), Pablo et al. (2011) and Levine (2003) believe that omitting students' first language prevents comprehension and language gain. Levine (2003)

asserted that not giving a role to the L1 is a useless attempt. Thus, it is recommended for both teachers and learners to use L1 when it is necessary. Deller and Rinvoluceri (2002) confirmed the use of L1 as a valuable device and resource. Additionally, some researchers state that the optimal use of students' L1 can benefit all learners in the L2 classroom. They assert that English language beginners progress more quickly in their language learning while using L1. Furthermore, they claim that English advanced learners can also enhance their linguistic intelligence by judicious use of their L1 (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002). They also state that comparative analysis of the L1 and L2 can provide some opportunities for learners' language development in the way that it allows them to observe differences and compare them and to become aware of the metaphorical, grammatical, phonological, prosodic, lexical and collocational differences of their L1 and L2 (Deller & Rinvoluceri, 2002). It can be concluded that many researchers see L1 as a critical cognitive device for L2 learning during all its stages.

Alshammari (2011) had an investigation on the use of Arabic as L1 in English classrooms of two Saudi Arabian colleges. Data were collected through two different types of questionnaires to examine the attitudes of Saudi students and teachers toward the use of Arabic in the English classes. Results showed that L1 was used for clarification and that the teachers' and students' judicious use of L1 in the class was beneficial to the learning process and it could increase learners' comprehension. Machaal (2012) stated that L1 usage can save class time of explanation, improve learners' understanding and have a positive effect on learning process.

Larbah and Oliver (2015) had a study to investigate the use of code switching (CS) in adult Arabic learners. Data were collected from four university classes in Western Australia. They came to the conclusion that access to the L1 through code switching helped the learners' language learning and enhanced their L2 linguistic competence.

Debreli and Oyman (2016) attempted in their study to find whether students' educational background and their level of second language proficiency can have an impact on their attitudes towards the application of L1 (Turkish) in their second language classes. A questionnaire was used to collect the necessary data. They came to the conclusion that the English learners had high positive attitudes towards the first language usage in their L2 classrooms. It is worth mentioning that, in their study, low level students showed more positive attitudes towards the L1 usage than the more advanced ones which confirm some previous studies in this regard such as Tang (2002).

2.3. Iranian EFL context

Many Iranian students take compulsory English courses during their studies at school, but they do not usually see any need for the L2 in their real life. As a result, they are not enough

motivated to learn English. Iranian English textbooks focus more on grammar rather than communication. The time allocated to English courses is very limited and is not in line with textbooks' goals. Most English classes are also held in L1 language and students are not expected to talk in English, their English comprehension and grammar knowledge are usually going to be tested in their written exams. All these lead most of the students to go to English language institutes to learn English. In contrary to school context, institutes are not in favor of using L1, and in most of the English institutes teachers and students are banned to use L1. It is worth mentioning that most of the English teachers of the institutes are Iranian, and they are not native speakers of English. However, as all learners have the same mother tongue in common with their teachers, using L1 is inevitable in L2 classes and both teachers and learners sometimes use L1. Different studies regarding the role of L1 in L2 classrooms have been done in Iranian EFL context. Next section presents some main studies in this regard.

2.4. Role of L1 in Iranian EFL Context

Nazari (2008) studied the perception of the Iranian university students' towards the use of L1 in their L2 classes. Learners in this study reported to be reluctant to use their first language in contrary to the other studies which showed positive attitudes toward use of L1 such as Debreli and Oyman (2016) and Larbah and Oliver (2015).

Mahmoudi and Yazdi Amirkhiz (2011) investigated a study to find students' and teachers' attitudes toward the use of first language in second language classrooms, the results revealed that the overuse of Persian language could have a demotivating effect on students. Students were also dissatisfied with the excessive use and dominance of their mother tongue in their English classrooms. The results of this study are in line with Nazari 's (2008) study.

Zohrabi et al. (2014) conducted a research to see the facilitating role of bilingualism in learning English vocabulary in an Iranian foreign language context. Two groups of the intermediate-level EFL learners and EFL teachers attended their study. Learners' native language was Azerbaijani-Turkish and their L2 was Farsi and they were learning English as a foreign language. Collection of data was through two different questionnaires and interviews. They came to the conclusion that both teachers and learners had positive attitudes toward the role of their L1 i.e., Turkish in English vocabulary learning. Ebrahimportaheer and Eissaie (2015) investigated a survey about problems facing Iranian English learners regarding learning vocabulary and grammar; they also

asked their opinions about L1 use in learning L2 skills. Learners asserted that the use of first language and code-switching by the teachers during teaching the complicated and difficult parts of grammar could have a positive effect on their English learning.

Tajgozari (2017) attempted to seek teachers' and learners' attitudes towards the usage of L1 in English institute classes. Like Zohrabi et al.'s study, he used questionnaires and conducted interviews. Elementary, intermediate, and advanced level students and their teachers attended the study. The results showed the positive attitude of institute English learners in all different language levels toward the use of first language in their English classrooms. Of course, teachers who were also teaching at schools stated that their use of L1 in high schools is much more than in institutes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

35 teachers and 35 English language learners attended in this study. The learners' level of proficiency was intermediate according to English placement test held at the institute. This level was chosen because most researchers agree with judicious use of L1 for them. Most of the participants were female in both groups of teachers and learners. Learners were studying at Melal Language Institute in Shiraz and their ages ranged from 20 to 35. Teachers were the researchers' colleagues and friends with at least a few years of experience in EFL teaching from different cities of Iran. Seven of these 35 teachers were also participated in the final interview.

3.2. Materials

First, relevant data were collected through two different questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for learners, they had 15 items with five-point likert scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. Then, the main reasons for switching to Persian in the English classes were discussed with some colleagues in a friendly atmosphere; as a result, five questions were prepared and asked seven teachers to answer.

4. Findings

4.1. Learners' Attitude Data Analysis

The first questionnaire was distributed among 35 intermediate EFL learners in the classroom in order to investigate their attitudes toward use of L1 in their English classroom. To ease the interpretation of the data, learners' responses were converted to percentage as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Learners' Answer Percentage

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Number of students
1	Teachers sometimes need to use their students' L1	13 37/14%	17 48.57%	2 5.71%	1 2.85%	3 8.57%	35
2	Sometimes, students' L1 is better to be allowed during English lessons	9 25.71%	12 34.28%	4 11.42%	3 8.57%	2 5.71%	35
3	Use of L1 prevents students from learning English	3 8.57%	2 5.71%	7 20%	12 34.28%	8 22.85%	35
4	Teachers had better follow an English-only policy in the class	4 11.42%	3 8.57%	6 17.14%	11 31.42%	8 22.85%	35
5	Bilingual dictionaries help students understand the new vocabulary for a long time	20 57.4%	9 25.71%	2 5.71%	1 2.85%	2 5.71%	35
6	I am not comfortable when my students use their first language.	3 8.57%	7 20%	5 14.28%	7 20%	5 14.28%	35
7	It is sometimes appropriate to use L1 to explain difficult vocabulary	12 34.28%	14 40%	3 8.57%	0 0%	3 8.57%	35

8	It is sometimes appropriate to explain new vocabulary especially abstract items using L1	11 31.42%	15 42.85%	2 5.71%	0 0%	2 5.71%	35
9	Using L1 helps students feel more comfortable/confident	9 25.71%	10 28.57%	6 17.14%	5 14.28%	2 5.71%	35
10	Using L1 establishes a good relationship with students	8 22.85%	8 22.85%	10 28.57%	2 5.71%	2 5.71%	35
11	Students can sometimes ask the vocabulary meaning in their L1	9 25.71%	18 51.42%	3 8.57%	3 8.57%	1 2.85%	35
12	Using L1 helps to recall the new vocabulary	5 14.28%	18 51.42%	3 8.57%	1 2.85%	3 8.57%	35
13	Using L1 helps students to understand the meaning of vocabulary	14 40%	13 37.14%	3 8.57%	2 5.71%	3 8.57%	35
14	Using L1 can reduce student's stress in the class	8 22.85%	12 34.28%	5 14.28%	5 14.28%	2 5.71%	35
15	Using L1 is not necessary in the class	1 2.85%	3 8.57%	2 5.71%	11 31.42%	14 40%	35

The data obtained from the first questionnaire were used to answer the first research question, results of the study indicated that learners had positive views towards using L1 in learning English vocabulary.

4.2. Teachers’ Attitude Data Analysis

The second questionnaire was answered by 35 teachers teaching at different language institutes. Table 2 shows teachers’ attitude percentages toward using L1 in their classrooms.

Table 2. Teachers’ Answer Percentages

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1	Teachers sometimes need to use their students’ L1	11 31.42%	19 54.28%	2 5.71%	2 5.71%	-	35
2	Sometimes, students’ L1 is better to be allowed during English lessons	11 31.42%	13 37.14%	3 8.57%	8 22.85%	-	35
3	Using L1 prevents students from learning English	-	8 22.15%	5 14.28%	18 51.42%	5 14.28%	35
4	Teachers had better follow an English-only policy in the classroom	1 2.85%	9 25.71%	2 5.71%	21 60%	1 2.85%	35

5	Bilingual dictionaries help students understand the new vocabulary for a long time	4 11.42%	5 14.28%	10 28.57%	12 34.28%	4 11.42%	35
6	I am not comfortable when my students use their L1.	3 8.57%	18 51.42%	5 14.28%	7 20%	1 2.85%	35
7	It is sometimes appropriate to use L1 to explain difficult vocabulary	9 25.71%	21 60%	2 5.71%	3 8.57%	-	35
8	It is sometimes appropriate to explain new vocabulary especially abstract items using L1	8 22.85%	23 65.71%	1 2.85%	1 2.85%	1 2.85%	35
9	Using L1 helps students feel more comfortable/confident	2 5.71%	17 48.57%	5 14.28%	11 31.42%	1 2.85%	35
10	Using L1 establishes a good relationship with students	3 8.57%	7 20%	9 2.57%	10 28.57%	6 17.14%	35
11	Students can sometimes ask the vocabulary meaning in their L1	4 11.42%	12 34.28%	4 11.42%	10 28.57%	5 14.28%	35
12	Using L1 helps to recall the new vocabulary	1 2.85%	9 2.57%	9 2.57%	11 31.42%	6 17.24%	35
13	Using L1 helps students to understand the meaning of vocabulary	3 8.57%	17 48.57%	--	14 40%	1 2.85%	35

14	Using L1 can reduce student's stress in the classroom	4 11.42%	14 40%	9 2.57%	7 20%	2 5.71%	35
15	Using L1 is not necessary in the classroom	3 8.57%	5 14.28%	2 5.71%	23 65.71%	2 5.71%	35

The data obtained from the second questionnaire were used to answer the second research question. As it was shown in the second table, most of the teachers had positive attitudes toward the contribution of L1 in teaching English vocabulary in their classrooms.

Seven of EFL teachers were also interviewed to understand the exact details of teachers' reasons of using or not using L1 in their English vocabulary teaching (see Appendix A).

4.3. Comparison of the Learners' and Teachers' Attitudes toward the Role of L1 in L2 Classes

The percentages obtained from table 1 and table 2 and interviews were compared to estimate the similarities and differences between learners and teachers' attitudes towards the role of L1 in learning new English vocabularies to answer the third research question.

Table1 and 2 indicated similar results, but to investigate differences between the attitudes of these two groups, the mean value of each group was estimated shown in table3.

Table 3. Comparing the Learners and Teachers' Attitudes regarding the role of L1 in EFL classroom

Group statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Attitudes	teachers	35	3.1905	.49682	.08398
	students	35	3.4895	.53723	.09081

As it was indicated in table 3, the mean score of teachers' attitudes (M=3.1905) towards using L1 in the classroom is very closely similar to the mean score in students group (M=3.4895). But to investigate whether there is statistically significant difference among these two groups, the independent samples T-test was estimated which was shown in table 4.

Table4. Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance s		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
Attitude Equal variances assumed	.026	.873	-.2418	68	.018	-.29905	.12369	-.54586	-.05223
Attitude Equal variances not assumed			-.2418	67.589	.018	-.29905	.12369	-.54589	-.05221

The results of table 4 show that the probability figure marked as (Sig) is more than .05: (.873), which indicates lack of statistical differences among learners' and teachers' attitudes regarding use of L1 in English classrooms.

5. Discussion

Although there are many negative attitudes toward the use of mother tongue in second language learning, still many teachers and students in Iran are in agreement with the contribution of L1 in English Language classrooms. Most teachers and learners use L1 as an oral technique which facilitates communication. Regarding the first research question of the study about learners' attitudes toward using Persian Language in learning English vocabulary, the results of this study showed learners' positive attitudes toward using Persian in their English classrooms to some extent that they could understand new difficult vocabularies. Learners believed that teachers' Persian use could reduce their stress in the class, establish a good relationship with their teachers and facilitate their communication. These results are in line with previous researches in the literature such as Alshammari (2011), Tajgozari (2017) and Zohrabi et al. (2014). The present study also illustrates learners' interest in employing bilingual dictionaries in the classroom as a tool which aids learners to comprehend new difficult words better. The results of this study confirmed the fact that L1 use and translation is an effective method of teaching new vocabularies. This is probably because using L1 can help teachers to save time; it is also a simple and short strategy (Laufer and Shmueli 1997). The second research question investigated teachers' attitudes towards using mother tongue in their English vocabulary teaching in TEFL environment. Findings of the present study indicated teachers' positive attitudes toward using L1 in teaching new difficult vocabularies and abstract ones. Teachers believed that an optimal use of L1 in classrooms works as a cognitive tool to enhance learners L2 acquisition. According to the teachers' answers to the questions, most teachers used L1 as the last resort and after trying some other strategies such as gestures, pictures, etc. Finally, the answer to the third research question regarding the relationship of learners and teachers attitudes toward using L1 in learning English vocabulary was positive. Both teachers and learners had similar positive attitudes toward using L1 in learning L2. All the teachers of this study rejected the English only policy application in their classrooms, though they believed in optimal use of L1 when it was necessary to help learners to increase their understanding and facilitate their learning. Furthermore, although this is teachers' duty to respect learners' first Language and they can sometimes use L1 to save time and energy and to help their learners overcome some difficulties, they should try to maximize learners' English use in the classroom to improve their English proficiency.

6. Conclusion

Previous research supported the contribution of L1 in language learning, this study also provided further support for the facilitating role of L1 from both teachers' and learners' points of view. They can benefit from judicious use of L1 in their classes.

The findings shed some light on learners' and teachers' perceptions on first language utilization in the English classroom and can have some impact on second language vocabulary teaching in L2 classrooms. Teachers and learners can use L1 in their classes for teaching and learning

English vocabularies as the last resort. Teachers can clarify points, reduce their learner's stress, build up good relationships, describe abstract terms and etc. Learners can also enhance their learning by using bilingual dictionaries and asking for L1 equivalent of the words, or learn new words and things in a stress free environment.

Like any other studies, this study has some limitations, first, learners' data were collected from just one institute, the policy of the institute or its teachers might have some impact on learners' attitudes. Second, data were collected just through questionnaires and it cannot be expected that even carefully modified questionnaires provide a rich picture of people attitudes, so this questionnaire is not an exception.

7. Suggestions and Recommendations

According to the results and findings of this study, the following tentative suggestions for further research can be offered: the present study can be duplicated with more participants and with the same questionnaire and the same design. It can also be done in a different context. This study used questionnaires as the main tool for collecting data, including other instruments and tasks is useful. Doing the same procedures of this study with other language components (grammar, pronunciation,...) and skills (listening, speaking, and writing, reading), in order to see whether the use of L1 is beneficial to teaching all these things is also interesting. The same study can be carried out with different groups of learners with different proficiency levels.

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Appendix A: Teachers' answers

Interview Items

1. Does L1 utilization reduce student's stress in the classroom?
2. Does using L1 establish a good relationship with students?
3. Do you agree with using bilingual dictionaries by your students to help them understand the new vocabulary?
4. Can using L1 help students to understand the meaning of vocabulary?
5. Is it sometimes appropriate to use L1 to explain difficult vocabulary?

Teachers' answers:

Teacher 1

1. It depends on the students' levels. I think it works well especially in elementary levels.
2. Maybe in the elementary levels but not in the other levels.
3. Yes, very much. It can help them a lot.
4. Yes, but not all the time, some other strategies such as gestures or pictures can be used as well.
5. Yes, it is appropriate to use L1 when the vocabulary is difficult to understand, especially for abstract words.

Teacher 2:

1. Yes, the students feel happy.
2. Yes, the feelings can be expressed pretty well in native Language.
3. Yes, some words are difficult to understand in native Language. Besides, it is very helpful for beginners.
4. Yes, of course.
5. Yes, some words are really difficult to understand even in L1.

Teacher 3:

1. Sure, of course, this is the case with low-level learners.
2. Yes, using L1 can convey feelings better and cause good relationship.

3. I recommend my students to use monolingual dictionaries, but, I agree that a bilingual dictionary can help them, too.

4. In some abstract words, it can help them.

5. If they do not get the meaning by examples and definitions, yes, why not?

Teacher 4:

1. Yes, I think in addition to reducing their stress, it helps them to concentrate more, of course, for low levels.

2. About some of the students who emphasize to know the words in Persian, yes, I think so.

3. Of course, especially for low levels it helps students a lot, but I think it is not necessary for advanced students.

4. I think they can understand the meaning of the words by posture and gestures that the teacher provides but again, they like to know the meaning in Persian.

5. Yes, especially it is necessary for abstract words.

Teacher 5:

1. For sure, it can reduce the stress of low level and non-confident learners, especially in the initiating sessions.

2. Yes, I use L1 for some students so that they trust me.

3. Sometimes, it can help.

4. It is not necessary for all words, just for difficult and abstract words.

5. Yes, it's better to use L1 as the last resort.

Teacher 6:

1. Yes, it can reduce learners' stress, but, I prefer to reduce their stress with other strategies rather than using L1.

2. Not necessarily, but it works sometimes.

3. No, I never recommend my students to use such dictionaries.

4. I'll try to make meanings clear by examples and other tools, if they don't work; I let some students to guess the Persian equivalents.

5. Number four,

Teacher 7:

1. Of course using L1 can reduce students' stress and anxiety especially about elementary students because initially EFL learners have some problems with their mother tongue ego and they have tendency toward using L1 in the classroom.
2. Yes sometimes it works.
3. Yes it depends on learners' proficiency levels. It can help learners in elementary level as well, but in other levels it's suggested to use L1 when it's necessary and use other strategies to convey the meaning.
4. Yes it helps them to understand the meaning of the difficult words especially when using various strategies and techniques are not effective.
5. Yes it is appropriate to use L1 to explain difficult vocabularies such as abstract words.