# An Investigation into the Effect of Foreign Language Learning on the Use of Taboo Words in the Learners' First Language Discourse

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**Abstract**
This study investigated if learning a foreign language like English, French or Arabic was effective on the learners' use of first language (Persian) taboos in their daily written and spoken discourse. More than the possible effect of learning a foreign language, the gender of learners, the language they were learning and the semantic domain to which the employed taboos belonged were scrutinized. To this end, a control group (46 Iranians unfamiliar with foreign languages) and three experimental groups (advanced learners of English, French & Arabic) were selected randomly and recruited for a researcher-made questionnaire and a set of Persian speaking and formal/informal writing tasks. Participants believed that language learning affects L1 taboo words usage; this was attested in their oral and written productions. It was found that control participants and Arabic learners had the highest and the lowest rate of taboo words usage, respectively. Moreover, participants used more taboos in their written than spoken productions. *The absolute forbidden words* and *neutral taboo words* were the most common semantic domains for English/French and Arabic learners, respectively. Male participants used more taboos compared with females while English and Arabic learners had the highest and the lowest taboo usage rates, respectively.

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## 1. Introduction

Taboo words exist in all cultures and despite the censorship they will persist in the community's lexicon. Their usages are controlled by certain circumstances or reasons such as religion, culture or social norms. Taboos are considered as very important features of each society members because they can be used to make the members of the society distinct from other members in other societies. Considering taboos as the cause and motivation of emergence or destruction of language forms in many cases, Arlato (1972) argued that "language taboo can be considered as the avoidance of application of special words because of different social reasons" (p. 227). Similarly, Wardhaugh (1986) pointed out that taboo is considered as a reflection of a society's disapproval towards a certain kind of behavior. The way people articulate language, what they say, and how they say something provide a window for others to evaluate their cultures, customs, beliefs, attitudes, education and social background.

Taboos are inseparable parts of a language due to the fact that language and culture are inseparable (Wardhaugh, 1986). Using taboos and euphemisms in daily conversations can be considered as one of the most common aspects of communication. Allan and Burridge (2006) indicated that taboos are different in different cultures. In fact, language societies are different in terms of the mental feedback used for taboo words. In other words, expressing a taboo word which is easily used in everyday conversation in a society may entail an intense mental feedback in another society. However, Qanbar (2011) believed that there are similarities of the major categories of taboos across cultures. This similarity of the taboo words in different cultures reveals similar values and beliefs in those cultures. Therefore, the familiarity with other languages and cultures may affect using the taboo terms.

Considering the fact that language and culture are interwoven, this study has tried to see if foreign language learning plays a role in the use of first language taboos. Moreover, gender effect has been focused and productive skills of speaking and writing have been compared in this regard. Further, the nature of the language and literature to which the learners have been familiarized was also of concern. This study has recruited the learners of three languages at the same time and has sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the participants' attitudes towards using taboo words in the first language?
2. How does foreign language learning affect the learners' use of taboos on their first language speech?
3. How does foreign language learning affect the learners' use of taboos on their first language written productions?
4. How do the semantic domains of the used Persian taboo words differ in the spoken and written productions of the foreign language learners?
5. How does the gender of language learners affect their use of Persian taboo words?
6. How do advanced learners of English, French and Arabic language and literature differ in terms of using Persian taboo words as the result of the language they have learnt?

## 2. Literature Review

The members of every language society avoid using words and expressions which have a negative face or unpleasant and impolite concept (Wardhaugh, 1986). These aspects are called language prohibitions or "taboos"_ a term derived from Polynesian language about three hundred years ago. In general, Asefi (2015) considered all prohibited behaviors as taboos. She argued that the reason of this prohibition lies in socio-cultural view toward special behaviors. More specifically, Qanbar (2011) defined taboo as "any word or a phrase or a topic that if mentioned in public causes embarrassment and

feeling of shame or provokes a sense of shock, and it is offending to the hearer's sensibilities or his beliefs" (p. 88).

Societies play a determining role in defining what is acceptable or not acceptable. In this regards, Akindele and Adegbite (1999) argued that taboo is one aspect of the social structure of that community. In fact, a taboo as a practice is reflected both in language and action. Taboos can include the social customs, religious and metaphysical beliefs and also the political system of a society. Humphries (1999) believed that peoples' reactions to particular taboo words can be change over time. For instance, some taboo words may lose their original force and acquire a more diminutive meaning or vice versa.

## 2.1 Factors Influencing Taboo Words Use

Lakoff (1975) considered *gender* as an important factor in using taboo words. According to Samadi (2014), "in most societies, women tend to use more polished words than men do" (p. 33). This ideology is prevalent in different societies: Women should act as femininely as possible. Based on this ideology, women should not use "vulgar language that is considered rough or crude" (Samadi, 2014, p. 33). Coates (1986) also argued that cultural or religious rules impose such restrictions on women. In fact, from the early times, it was accepted by the society members that women's language should be more polite than that of men.

*Education* also plays a role in the use of taboos. As Qanbar (2011) indicated, educated people are likely to use less taboo words than uneducated people. Holmes (1992) also suggested that teenagers use more taboos than adults or children. Other factor includes the *demographic background*. For instance, as Qanbar (2011) suggested, rural and urban people perceive and use the taboos differently. According to her, there is also the *socio-economic factor* can also influence the use of taboo words. For instance, she indicated

that "the poor and those living in degraded housing conditions are more inclined to use taboo words due to their style of living" (p. 97). In fact, children learn the use of taboos from their parents.

The *formality level* of a situation is the other factor which influences the use of taboo words. In this regards, some scholars (Trudgill, 1983; Wardhaugh, 1986) defined the linguistic forms associated with formality of a situation as styles. They indicated that styles can be assumed as a continuum with scales ranging from formal to informal. Allan and Burridge (2006) argued that "the source of stylistic variations can be found in the connotative meaning of words which give rise to cross-varietal synonymy, that is, words with the same denotative meaning but different connotative meanings" (p.47). Therefore, "connotations attached to the words give rise to x-phemisms (euphemism, orthophemism & dysphemism) which in turn function as "stylistic indicators' in particular contexts of use" (p. 29).

## 2.2 Classification of Taboo words

Several scholars attempted to categorize the taboo words of different societies. For instance, Wardhaugh (1986) categorized taboo words and phrases into seven categories of 1) Copulative Terms, 2) Human Genitals Terms, 3) Sexual Irregularities Terms, 4) Excretory Terms, 5) Animal terms and 6) death. Allan and Burridge (2006) believed that taboos can be divided into several categories: 1) Liquids which secrete from body (such as sweat, snot, etc.). 2) Sexual organs and actions, urine and defecate actions. 3) Diseases, death and murdering. 4) The name of holy and supreme people and actions. 5) Collecting, saving and consuming food.

Focusing on Pakistani society, Khan and Parviz (cited in Samadi, 2014, p. 32) categorized taboo words into three categories of 1) Linguistic taboos, 2) Food and 3) Modesty taboos. They explained that food taboos refer to what is unfit to eat like horses and hogs in Pakistani society. Concerning the modesty

taboo words, the researchers indicated that in Pakistan, talking about face, ankle, breast or whatever is immodest is considered as a taboo.

One of the most known classifications of taboo words is presented by Qanbar (2011) that categorizes taboo words in Islamic countries. He divided taboo words into two broad categories of *Context-specific* and *general*. These two categories also branch out into other subcategories. *Context-specific* category includes words which are "neutral words which get tabooed in particular contexts" (p. 91). 1) *Nontaboo words* are neutral in meaning in everyday speech. These words are not offensive by nature but become taboos in certain contexts when used as swear words. Religion has also played a role in tabooing these words, for example, the words such as (pig, dog, etc.) are neutral by nature but as these animals are associated with impurity and uncleanness in Islamic perspective they can become taboos in some contexts. 2) *Words related to the hearer's physical or social defects*: "like mentioning *divorce* in front of a divorced woman, or *blindness* in front of a blind man" (Qanbar, 2011, p. 29).

The second main category, *General* taboos, is also divided into two categories of *Unmentionable terms* and *mentionable with minimizers.* *Unmentionable terms* are divided into the following subcategories: 1) Words or terms referring to the private organs of the human body and their functions, and body effluvia, 2) Words or terms referring to religion (blasphemy) or words against religious figures and symbols, 3) Words or terms referring to national or historical or the present political figures or political system, 4) The first names of one's female members of the family mentioned in public or before an outsider and 5) Words referring to things that you give away to the poor and the needy, or friends on social occasions. *Mentionable with minimizers* include words and phrases that are offensive if mentioned unaccompanied with certain fixed conventional phrases. In fact,

these fixed phrases minimize the offensive effect of the taboo word and make it acceptable. Qanbar (2011) divided this category into three groups: 1) Words or phrases referring to unclean places or objects (For example: sewages, bathrooms, footwear, etc.), 2) Words or phrases referring to metaphysical things that go beyond the control of the human being (For example: supernatural creatures like jennies, ghosts; certain diseases, accidents resulting in deformation of human body like getting burned), 3) Words or phrases referring to the expressions of admiration for things or objects we admire and like (p. 95). Due to its recency, detailed descriptions and comprehensiveness and inclusion of Iran in the Islamic culture, Qanbar's (2011) conceptual classification of taboos has been employed for the determining the semantic domains of the used taboos by the participants of this study.

## 2.3 Taboo Words and Foreign Language Learning

The results of the studies on multilingualism and language acquisition revealed that taboo language is rarely included as part of the foreign language curriculum (Dewaele, 2004). However several scholars (e.g., Jay, 1992; Mercury, 1995) believed that some taboos such as cursing and/or swearing are an important part of our communicative repertoire as speakers of a language. On the contrary, there is "a prevailing attitude in many societies and cultures that taboo words are linguistically impoverished and even morally repugnant utterances, and should be avoided at all costs" (Horan, 2013, p. 284). Many scholars (e.g., Dewaele, 2004, 2010; Horan, 2011; Mugford, 2008) also identified the lack of reference to taboo words in formal education.

Having the pedagogical intentions, some sociolinguists tried to organize the teachable taboos. Seifried (2006) for example attempted to make some basic generalizations on the linguistic taboos in the American society. He

argued that verbal taboos include a limited number of categories such as sex and bodily functions, which are generally spread throughout different cultures. He also claimed that recent events in the media provide more freedom for Americans than before in terms of the use of taboo words. In fact, as the researcher indicated because of the freedom in using taboo words, shadings of euphemisms are hardly needed anymore to express words which have become part of everyday life.

Van Oudenhoven et al. (2008) investigated different taboos in eleven cultures. 3000 participants from Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Croatia, Poland, Great Britain, United States, Norway, Greece and Netherland constituted the sample of the study. The researchers asked the participants to write swear and taboo words they use in provocative situations. Based on the participants' notes, 12000 phrases were gathered. The researchers categorized the phrases into various groups and concluded that taboos vary greatly in different cultures and hearing taboo for some people lead to very intense reaction. These phrases should be of great concern for policy makers and curriculum developers of foreign language teaching and learning because indifference to them might destroy the whole process of language learning and establishing sound social interactions. The review of literature suggests that taboos are inseparable parts of a language. Even though research on taboos has flourished over the recent years, the role of learning foreign language on the use of first language taboo words has only recently been recognized as an area that needs significant empirical evidence to move the field forward and addresses the major gaps in this field.

## 3. Method
## 3.1 Participants
 The participants were selected from Iranian adults, some with no reputation of foreign language learning and some who were learners of English, French

and Arabic at advanced levels; 46 Iranians, unfamiliar with foreign languages as the control and 138 foreign language learners (46 English learners, 46 French learners & 46 Arabic learners (23 males and 23 females in each group) as the experimental participants were chosen through convenience sampling procedure and recruited for the study. Experimental participants were selected from graduate students of English language departments of Shiraz university (N=49), Shiraz Islamic Azad university (N=9), Tehran University (N=36), Fordowsi University of Mashhad (N=12), Isfahan University (N=11) and some private language Institutes (N=21). The participants were informed about the study and their consents were gained. All were adults with the age range of 22 to 35 and native speakers of Persian from the more or less similar socio-economic background. Indeed, the researchers made an effort to consider a single stratum of the society to keep the socio-economic parameters constant for both the control and the experimental participants.

### 3.2 Instruments

The following instruments were employed to gather the required data:

- *Persian taboo words usage questionnaire_* To investigate the learners' use of first language taboos in their daily interactions, the researcher designed a questionnaire and employed it for both the control and experimental participants. The questionnaire included three sections; the first section encompassed the demographic information of the participants, the second included three yes/no questions about the use of taboos, participants' feelings towards hearing taboos and the effect of foreign language learning on using first language taboos, ranking taboos based on their social offence and the reasons of using them. Finally, in the third section, the participants were asked to report their use of Persian taboos in a Likert scale. The third section included 11 five-

points Likert scale items. To make sure about the reliability of the questionnaire, after the experts' validation, the researcher ran a Cronbach's alpha analysis through which the questionnaire's reliability (r = 0.91) was attested.

- *Persian speaking task_* To explore the first language taboo words used in learners' daily speech, a Persian speaking task was conducted. For conducting this speaking task, 15 participants of each group were selected randomly and were asked to talk about foreign language learning at school-time in ten minutes. The main rationale behind the selection of this topic was the assumption that all participants had the experience of learning English and Arabic at school time. The speaking tasks took place as face-to-face interviews held in classroom or at university campus, depending on the participants' preferences. Ethical issues were also considered by the researcher. To provide a natural context in which the participants feel free to use taboos, the researcher first tried to make friends with the interviewees and then guaranteed the anonymity of the gathered data. The participants' speech were recorded, transcribed and then codified. Intra-rater reliability coefficient was calculated to check its reliability (r=0.94).

- *Persian writing task_* Learners' pieces of Persian writing were utilized as the third instrument. The researcher suggested three different topics. The participants (in both control and experimental groups) were asked to select two of the topics and write their opinions in two different styles of informal and formal. The topics were selected from three different areas of sociology, education and politics to give the participants choice to feel free to write. The researcher also ran the intra-rater reliability test to explore the reliability of taboos codification (r=0.97).

## 3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Four groups of Iranians (one unfamiliar with foreign languages as the control and three groups of advanced English, French and Arabic learners as the experimental participants) took part in the study. Firstly, to determine the participants' attitudes about the use of Persian taboos, the researcher administered a Persian taboo words usage questionnaire for all the participants. The control and the experimental participants' responses were collected and compared to determine the possible effect of foreign language learning on the learners' attitudes about the use of Persian taboos in their daily speech. Then, through the Persian speaking task, the data were collected to determined taboo terms used in the participants' speech among the control and the experimental participants. After recording and transcribing the participants' speech the data were coded twice by the researcher in a two-week time span and the degree of consistency between the two coding attempts was estimated. Afterwards, the participants were asked to write two or three paragraphs about the suggested topics presented by the researcher. Then, the researcher scrutinized the usage of Persian taboo terms for both the experimental and the control participants. The reliability of both speaking and writing tasks were certified through statistical analysis. The data were also collected through these instruments from the control group. Then, the researcher compared experimental groups control group in terms of using taboos in Persian on both speaking and writing tasks. In addition, to investigate if gender has any effects on language learners' use of first language taboos, the researcher compared male and female participants in terms of using taboos in the first language. Moreover, learners of different languages were compared to see the effect of the language they had learnt. Through statistical analyses the semantic domains of the used taboo words

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was also assessed based on Qanbar's (2011) classification on both Persian speaking and writing tasks.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section focuses on the statistical analyses carried out on the obtained data. The first research question aimed at determining the attitude of foreign language learners regarding the possible effect of learning a foreign language on the use of taboos in their first language. In order to achieve this, the participants answered a researcher-made questionnaire with five items which made the researcher able to compare the responses of the control and the experimental groups. The first item of the questionnaire asked whether the participants use taboo words in their Persian interactions. Tables 1 to 5 present the descriptive statistics of the participants responses regarding the use of Persian taboos in their daily conversations, their feelings when hearing Persian taboos, the reasons of using taboos (among three categories of anger, insult & better relations), selecting the most offensive category of taboos and the effect of learning a foreign language on Persian taboo words use, respectively.

Table 1
*Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Responses Regarding Using Persian Taboos*

|  |  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control group | No | 11 | 23.9 | 23.9 | 23.9 |
|  | Yes | 35 | 76.1 | 76.1 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| English learners | No | 13 | 28.3 | 28.3 | 28.3 |
|  | Yes | 33 | 71.7 | 71.7 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| French learners | No | 17 | 37.0 | 37.0 | 37.0 |
|  | Yes | 29 | 63.0 | 63.0 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| Arabic learners | No | 21 | 45.7 | 45.7 | 45.7 |
|  | Yes | 25 | 54.3 | 54.3 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics Regarding Participants' Feelings about Hearing Persian Taboos*

|  |  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control group | No | 20 | 43.5 | 43.5 | 43.5 |
|  | Yes | 26 | 56.5 | 56.5 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| English learners | No | 32 | 69.6 | 69.6 | 69.6 |
|  | Yes | 14 | 30.4 | 30.4 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| French learners | No | 21 | 45.7 | 45.7 | 45.7 |
|  | Yes | 25 | 54.3 | 54.3 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| Arabic learners | No | 24 | 52.2 | 52.2 | 52.2 |
|  | Yes | 22 | 47.8 | 47.8 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |

Table 3

*Participants' Responses Regarding the Reasons of Using Persian Taboos*

|  |  | Reasons | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Anger | Insult | Relation |  |
| Language | Control group | 15 | 17 | 14 | 46 |
|  | English learners | 11 | 13 | 22 | 46 |
|  | French learners | 11 | 12 | 23 | 46 |
|  | Arabic learners | 9 | 14 | 23 | 46 |
| Total |  | 46 | 56 | 82 | 184 |

Table 4

*Participants' Responses Regarding the Most Offensive Category of Persian Taboos*

|  | Most offensive taboos | Tot |
|---|---|---|

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|  |  | Non-taboo words | Words related to the hearer's physical or social defects | Unmentionable | Mentionable with minimizers | al |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Language | Control group | 9 | 22 | 7 | 8 | 46 |
|  | English learners | 6 | 4 | 33 | 3 | 46 |
|  | French learners | 5 | 5 | 34 | 2 | 46 |
|  | Arabic learners | 3 | 9 | 34 | 0 | 46 |
| Total |  | 23 | 25 | 123 | 13 | 184 |

Table 5
*Experimental Participants' Views on the Effect of Learning a Foreign Language on Persian Taboos Use*

|  |  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| English learners | No | 16 | 34.8 | 34.8 | 34.8 |
|  | Yes | 30 | 65.2 | 65.2 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| French learners | No | 10 | 21.7 | 21.7 | 21.7 |
|  | Yes | 36 | 78.3 | 78.3 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |
| Arabic learners | No | 11 | 23.9 | 23.9 | 23.9 |
|  | Yes | 35 | 76.1 | 76.1 | 100.0 |
|  | Total | 46 | 100.0 | 100.0 |  |

As Table 1 shows, majority of the participants used Persian taboos in their daily conversations: Control group (76.1%), English learners (71.1%), French learners (63.0%), and Arabic learners (54.3%). The difference between the participants of four groups was found to be insignificant through a Chi-square analysis (Asymp Sig.= 0.568). According to Table 2, most of the control group (56%) and French learners (54.3%) indicated that hearing taboo words bothers them. While, 69.9% of English learners and 52.2% of Arabic learners reported that hearing taboos does not interrupt their social

interactions. To ensure that the groups had statistically different frequencies, another Chi-square was run which showed that there was not any significant difference between the groups in terms of their feelings towards hearing taboo words in daily interactions (Asymp Sig.= 0.256). As suggested by Table 3, control participants ranked Insult (N=17) as the first reason of using taboos while, majority of the experimental participants considered the Type of the relationship with interlocutor as the main reason of using L1 taboos in their conversations. Another Chi-square indicated that there was not any significant difference between the groups in terms of ranking the reasons of using taboo words (Asymp Sig.= 0.496). Table 4 revealed that majority of the experimental participants considered the unmentionable taboo words as the most offensive category of L1 taboos while control participants knew words related to the hearer's defects as the most offensive. Another Chi-square certified a significant difference between the groups in terms of selecting the most offensive taboo words (Asymp Sig.=.021). Table 5 showed that most participants of the experimental groups (English=65.2%, French=78.3%, and Arabic=76.1%) believed that foreign language learning can affect the use of taboos in first language. Another Chi-square revealed that there was not any significant difference between the learners of different foreign languages attitudes towards the effect of foreign language learning on using first language taboos (Asymp Sig.=0.732) meaning that foreign language learners unanimously believe that  familiarity with a foreign language affects the use of the first language taboo words.

Through the next section of questionnaire, the participants were asked to report their use of Persian taboos in daily conversations. The questionnaire included 11 five-point Likert-scale items each encompassed two situations of formal and informal. To investigate if there was any difference between the participants regarding using Persian taboos in formal and informal contexts

an ANOVA was employed. Tables 6 and 7 report the descriptive statistics of the participants' responses and the ANOVA analysis, respectively.

Table 6

*Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Responses Regarding the Use of Persian Taboos in Formal and Informal Interactions*

| | | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | Control group | 46 | 1.59 | 4.05 | 2.6640 | .61936 |
| | English learners | 46 | 1.55 | 3.55 | 2.5692 | .51047 |
| | French learners | 46 | 1.91 | 3.55 | 2.5909 | .46877 |
| | Arabic learners | 46 | 1.68 | 3.05 | 2.3538 | .31050 |
| Formal situation | Control group | 46 | 1.00 | 3.73 | 2.1818 | .53868 |
| | English learners | 46 | 1.09 | 2.91 | 2.0059 | .40128 |
| | French learners | 46 | 1.27 | 3.18 | 2.1601 | .46599 |
| | Arabic learners | 46 | 1.27 | 2.45 | 1.9269 | .27615 |
| Informal situation | Control group | 46 | 1.64 | 4.73 | 3.1462 | .77814 |
| | English learners | 46 | 1.91 | 4.27 | 3.1324 | .67752 |
| | French learners | 46 | 2.18 | 4.09 | 3.0217 | .52633 |
| | Arabic learners | 46 | 1.91 | 3.73 | 2.7806 | .40727 |

Table 7
*Comparing the Participants Regarding the Use of Persian Taboos in Formal and Informal Interactions*

| | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | Between Groups | 2.458 | 3 | .819 | 3.413 | .019 |
| | Within Groups | 43.215 | 180 | .240 | | |
| | Total | 45.673 | 183 | | | |
| Formal contexts | Between Groups | 2.079 | 3 | .693 | 3.723 | .012 |
| | Within Groups | 33.508 | 180 | .186 | | |
| | Total | 35.587 | 183 | | | |
| Informal contexts | Between Groups | 3.950 | 3 | 1.317 | 3.494 | .017 |
| | Within Groups | 67.834 | 180 | .377 | | |
| | Total | 71.784 | 183 | | | |

As Table 7 depicts, there was a statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of using Persian taboos in their daily interactions (sig. = .019), formal contexts (sig.=.012), and informal contexts (sig. = .013). A Post hoc test showed that the control participants significantly used more taboo words in their daily conversations (sig.=.020), as well as in formal (sig.=.041), and informal contexts (sig.=.024) than the language learners.

Concerning the second research question a Chi-square test was utilized to compare the foreign language learners and control participants in terms of using taboos in Persian speaking tasks based on Qanbar's (2011) taxonomy which specified eleven semantic domains for taboo words: 1) nontaboo words which are neutral in meaning in everyday speech but become taboos in particular context when used as swear words, 2) words related to the hearer's physical or social defects, 3) the absolute forbidden words or terms, 4) the

words or terms referring to the private organs of the human body and their functions, 5) words or terms referring to religion (blasphemy) or words against religious figures and symbols, 6) words or terms referring to national or historical or the present political figures or political systems, 7) words referring to the first name of one's female members of the family mentioned in public or before an outsider, 8) words referring to things that people give away to the poor and the needy, or friends on social occasions, 9) words or phrase referring to unclean places or objects, 10) words or phrase referring to metaphysical things that go beyond the control of the human being, and 11) words or phrase referring to expressions of admiration for things or objects people admire or like. Tables 8 and 9 show the frequency and the participants' comparison, respectively.

Table 8
*Frequency of Taboos in 11 Semantic Domains in Persian Speaking Task*

| | | Semantic domains | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 4 | 5 | 6 7 | 8 | 9 | 1 0 | 11 | |
| Groups | Control group | 171 | 87 | 242 | 0 | 25 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 32 | 7 | 5 | 585 |
| | English learners | 70 | 21 | 176 | 0 | 56 | 38 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 376 |
| | French learners | 66 | 19 | 106 | 0 | 27 | 18 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 244 |
| | Arabic learners | 24 | 3 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 67 |
| Total | | 331 | 130 | 551 | 0 | 108 | 80 | 0 | 0 | 43 | 16 | 13 | 1272 |

As it can be seen, the participants did not use the following domains in their speech: the absolute forbidden words or terms referring to the private organs of the human body and their functions, words referring to the first name of one's female members of the family mentioned in public or before an outsider and words referring to things that you give away to the poor and the

needy, or friends on social occasions. In addition, the participants used the absolute forbidden words or terms more than the other semantic domains.

Table 9
*Comparing the Semantic Domains of the Used Taboos in the Persian Speaking Task*

|  | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 129.054[a] | 21 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 133.196 | 21 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 2.180 | 1 | .140 |
| N of Valid Cases | 1272 |  |  |

As it is discernible, there was a significant difference among the four groups in terms of using Persian taboos in speaking task (sig. =.000). Table 9 revealed that the participants of the control group (F=585) and Arabic learners (F=67) had the highest and the lowest frequency of taboo words usage in their speech, respectively. To answer the third research question, the frequencies of taboo words used by the participants in informal and formal contexts were compared in Persian writing task. Table 10 and 11 depict the frequencies of Persian taboos and their comparison report.

Table 10
*Frequency of Taboos in 11 Semantic Domains in Formal Persian Writing Task*

|  |  | Semantic domains | | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 9 | 8 | 10 | 11 | | |
| Groups | Control group | 53 | 11 | 36 | 0 | 69 | 52 | 0 | 0 | 11 | 4 | 0 | 236 |
|  | English learners | 51 | 7 | 28 | 0 | 24 | 49 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 3 | 171 |
|  | French learners | 37 | 4 | 17 | 0 | 20 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 112 |
|  | Arabic learners | 22 | 1 | 15 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 60 |
| Total |  | 163 | 23 | 96 | 0 | 116 | 134 | 0 | 0 | 33 | 10 | 4 | 579 |

According to Table 10, the participants did not use the absolute forbidden words or terms referring to the private organs of the human body and their functions, words referring to the first name of one's female members of the

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family mentioned in public or before an outsider, and words referring to things that people give away to the poor and the needy, or friends on social occasions. The control participants used the words referring to religion or words against religious figures or symbols more than the other taboo semantic domains, however, the foreign language learners used the nontaboo words which are neutral in meaning in everyday speech but become taboos in particular context more than the other domains in their formal writing tasks.

Table 11
*Comparing the Semantic Domains of the Used Taboos in the Persian Formal Writing Task*

|  | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 52.893[b] | 21 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 55.528 | 21 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 1.057 | 1 | .304 |
| N of Valid Cases | 579 |  |  |

According to the results, the difference among the frequencies of the taboo words used by the participants of different groups in their formal writing tasks was significant (sig.=.000) meaning that the control participants used more Persian taboo words in the formal writing tasks (F=236). The results also revealed that Arabic learners used the lowest frequency of the taboos in their formal writing tasks. Tables 12 and 13 depict the frequency and the mean comparison for the informal writing task, respectively.

Table 12
*Frequency of Taboos in 11 Semantic Domains in Informal Persian Writing Task*

|  |  | Semantic domains | | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 9 | 10 | 11 |  |  |
| Groups | Control group | 112 | 26 | 238 | 7 | 94 | 91 | 0 0 | 44 | 13 | 9 | 634 |  |
|  | English learners | 95 | 20 | 215 | 9 | 67 | 84 | 0 0 | 71 | 13 | 7 | 581 |  |
|  | French learners | 55 | 19 | 183 | 3 | 53 | 51 | 0 0 | 29 | 5 | 3 | 401 |  |
|  | Arabic learners | 45 | 13 | 38 | 0 | 19 | 12 | 0 0 | 11 | 4 | 5 | 147 |  |
| Total |  | 307 | 78 | 674 | 19 | 233 | 238 | 0 0 | 155 | 35 | 24 | 1763 |  |

As presented by the Table 12, the participants did not use words referring to the first name of one's female members of the family mentioned in public or before an outsider and "words referring to things that you give away to the poor and the needy, or friends on social occasions. The results also revealed that the participants of the control group like the English and the French learners used the absolute forbidden words which are considered as the unmentionable words more than the other semantic domains. Arabic learners used the nontaboo words in their informal writing tasks more than other taboos.

Table 13

*Comparing the Semantic Domains of the Used Taboos in the Persian Informal Writing Task*

|  | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 66.973[b] | 24 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 63.997 | 24 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 1.733 | 1 | .188 |
| N of Valid Cases | 1763 | | |

Table 13 demonstrates that there was a significant difference among the frequencies of the taboo words used by the participants in their informal writing tasks (sig.=.000). Accordingly, the control participants used more Persian taboos in their informal writing tasks compared with foreign language learners, while Arabic learners used the lowest frequency of the taboo words in their informal writing tasks. The fourth objective of this study was to figure out if the semantic domains of the used taboo words differ in the spoken and written tasks of the foreign language learners. To this end, another Chi-square was run to compare the frequency of taboo words used by the experimental participants in their oral and written productions (both formal & informal styles). Table 14 presents the results of this comparison.

Table 14
*Comparing the Semantic Domains of Persian Taboos Used in Speaking and Writing Tasks by Learners of Different Languages*

|  |  | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English learners | Pearson Chi-Square | 58.018[b] | 8 | .000 |
|  | Likelihood Ratio | 67.437 | 8 | .000 |
|  | Linear-by-Linear Association | 25.186 | 1 | .000 |
|  | N of Valid Cases | 1128 |  |  |
| French learners | Pearson Chi-Square | 32.164[b] | 8 | .000 |
|  | Likelihood Ratio | 35.678 | 8 | .000 |
|  | Linear-by-Linear Association | 23.420 | 1 | .000 |
|  | N of Valid Cases | 757 |  |  |
| Arabic learners | Pearson Chi-Square | 17.709[b] | 7 | .013 |
|  | Likelihood Ratio | 26.497 | 7 | .000 |
|  | Linear-by-Linear Association | 2.479 | 1 | .115 |
|  | N of Valid Cases | 274 |  |  |

Table 14 reveals that there was a significant difference regarding the frequency of Persian taboos used by the participants in their speaking and writing tasks: English learners (sig.=.000,), French learners (sig.=.000), and Arabic learners (sig.=.013). Foreign language learners used more taboos in their written productions compared with their spoken productions. In addition, the results showed that English and French learners had the highest frequency from the absolute forbidden words or terms in both speaking and writing skills. Arabic learners also had the highest frequency from the absolute forbidden words or terms in the speaking skill. While, concerning the writing skill, they had the highest frequency from nontaboo words which are neutral in meaning in everyday speech but become taboos in particular

context. To probe the effect of gender on language learners' use of Persian taboos another Chi-square was run. According to Table 15 there was a significant difference between males and females in using first language taboos in their verbal productions (sig.= .000). As discernible, the male language learners used more taboo words than the female learners.

Table 15
*Persian Taboos Used by Male and Female Foreign Language Learners*

|  | Frequency | Chi-square | df | Asymp. Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Males | 2265 | 232.168[a] | 1 | .000 |
| Females | 1349 |  |  |  |
| Total | 3614 |  |  |  |

The last objective of the study was to determine if learners of English, French and Arabic literature differ in terms of using Persian taboos as the result of the language they learnt. To this end, the researcher compared the three foreign language learners' groups based on their performances on both speaking and writing tasks. As Table 16 suggests, this difference was statistically significant (sig.=.000); English learners significantly used more taboo words compared with the learners of French who in their own turns used more Persian taboos than Arabic learners.

Table 16
*Persian Taboos Used by Learners of Different Languages*

|  | Frequency | Chi-square | df | Asymp. Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English learners | 1128 | 509.609[a] | 2 | .000 |
| French learners | 757 |  |  |  |
| Arabic learners | 247 |  |  |  |
| Total | 2159 |  |  |  |

## 4.1 Discussion

Concerning learners' use of Persian taboos, the results showed that the control participants used more taboos than the language learners who were different

based on the language they were learning in this regard. Moreover, it was found that male foreign language learners used more taboos then their female peers. Participants used more taboos in their speech than the formal written tasks while the rate of using taboos in informal written tasks was the highest; the formality of the context lessened the rate of using taboos for foreign language learner however it was not the case for the control participants.

When it comes to possible explanations and speculations, it can be argued that monolingual and bilingual people experience different emotional intensity when hearing or using their first language taboo words. As Dewaele (2004) argued, "bilingual speakers report usually experiencing greater emotional intensity when using swear words or taboo words in their first (or dominant) language compared to their second language" (p. 87). The results are also in line with Ayçiçegi and Harris (2004) who indicated that "second language users commonly acknowledge that obscene and taboo words generate less anxiety when pronounced in a foreign language" (p. 3). In other words, Ayçiçegi and Harris (2004) believed that first language taboo words evoke greater emotional arousal than their second language counterparts. Therefore, the emotional factors may prevent foreign language learners from using first language taboo words.

The findings also indicated that foreign language learners significantly used more taboo words in their written production compared with their spoken production. This can be justified based on the fact that written message lacks of nonverbal signals completely and needs more explicit explanations. The effect of gender on the use of taboo words is also confirmed by other studies. For instance, Jay (1999) indicated that "men curse more often than women; men use a larger vocabulary of curse words than do women; and men use more offensive curse words than do women" (p. 166). This piece of finding accords with Hadian and Yoosefi's (2015) study

which revealed that males used more taboo words in their conversations than females. Moreover, Gao (2013) indicated "women are more polite, indirect and collaborative in conversation, while men are more direct and competitive" (p. 11). Jay (1999) also believed that "women are more expected to exhibit control over their thoughts, while men are more free to exhibit hostile and aggressive speech habits" (p. 181).

The researchers also compared advanced learners of English, French and Arabic literature differ in terms of using Persian taboos. English and Arabic learners had the highest and the lowest rate of Persian taboo words usage in their speaking and writing than the Arabic learners, respectively. This may suggest that familiarity with different languages and consequently literatures may bring about different attitudes towards L1 usage in general and L1 taboos in particular.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the findings, most of the participants considered learning a foreign language as an effective factor in the use of taboos in the first language. The results also revealed that compared with the other groups, control participants had the highest frequency of taboos in their speaking and writing tasks, while, Arabic learners had the lowest frequency of taboo words in their speaking and formal writing tasks. The results also showed that the foreign language learners significantly used more taboos in their written productions than their speech. Based on the results, the absolute forbidden words or terms were the most used taboo words in the speaking and writing of English and French learners. While, Arabic learners had the highest frequency of this semantic domain in their speech and nontaboo words which are neutral in meaning in everyday speech but become taboos in particular context on their writing tasks. Additionally, the results showed that gender had a determining role in use of first language taboos. Finally, the findings

demonstrated that English learners significantly used more Persian taboo words than the other two groups of language learners. In other words, it seems that Arabic language and literature has made its learners more polite in their daily L1 interactions; this may be rooted in the religious functions of this language. In fact, this study indicated that foreign language learning can have conscious and unconscious effects on the discourse of the first language speaking and writing.

Although the research has reached its aims, there were unavoidable limitations in its conduction. For instance, although the sample was fairly large, it may not be fully representative of all Iranian language learners and this may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the findings need to be interpreted with caution and should be further explored in more representative samples.

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