

## **Funds of Knowledge as a Scaffolding Pedagogical Strategy: How Teachers Bring their Funds of Knowledge into the Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

Despite frequent references to the field of Persian language education, it is only in the past decade that scholars have conducted empirical research on Persian language teaching. Like teachers of other foreign languages, Persian language teachers base their teaching methodologies on their expertise, practical experiences, and students' needs. They not only teach about the language, but they also portray the social, cultural, and educational contexts in which they were born, grew up, and were educated. This ethnographic article describes the teaching practices of three teachers of Persian as a heritage language at the beginning level. First, I investigate the language teaching methodologies each teacher applies in their classroom. Second, I discuss the ways that teachers bring various forms of funds of knowledge (Moll et.al. 1992) into their teaching journey. I also explore if and how the funds of knowledge of Persian language teachers are integrated into their teaching activities and materials in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** heritage language teachers, second language teaching methodologies, sociocultural theory, funds of knowledge, scaffolding technique, contextualization.

## Introduction

A heritage language (HL) refers to any language which is spoken at home by the family and community members and with which individuals have a personal and historical connection (Valdés, 2001). Fishman (2001) categorizes heritage languages into Indigenous, colonial, and immigrant groups; Indigenous languages were or are still spoken by the people native to the Americas, colonial languages represent the languages of some European groups that first colonized parts of the United States, and immigrant languages were and are spoken by immigrants arriving in the United States. In short, in the United States, heritage languages refer to all languages other than English.

The name ‘Persian’ is an umbrella term that is used in everyday interaction in an English context. Persian, or Farsi, is one of the Southwestern Iranian languages spoken in Iran, Afghanistan (Dari), and Tajikistan (Tajiki). Persian is also called a less commonly taught language. That is, it is not included in “world language” programs in either public or private schools. Therefore, first and second-generation Iranian children in the United States (re)learn Persian as a heritage language/second language, not in school settings, but most likely through their family, on the weekends, after school, or at universities. These classes are different in the levels the teachers “teach and the materials they use. Some do not even teach literacy and only

concentrate on speaking Persian and teaching cultural norms” (Meybodi, 2014, p.22).

Persian language learners (PLL) may be inspired or pushed to learn/relearn a heritage language due to cultural, linguistic, or vocational needs. They may begin their acquisition of Persian with differing amounts of exposure to the language through the culture and traditions of their families and communities. In most Persian language classrooms, due to lack of budget, different types of students learning Persian as a second or foreign language are placed in one classroom, which can inhibit learning (Sedighi, 2010).

Educators, teachers, and speakers of Persian have long made reference to language and culture as important for heritage language education. Besides, the research of scholars such as Megerdooian (2010), Atoofi (2013), Sedighi (2012), Shabani-Jadidi (2016), and Ramezanzadeh (2010) have focused on linguistic and cultural aspects to investigate the language learning of students. Research is needed on Persian language teaching methodologies in various educational and extracurricular contexts such as schools and universities. For example, research is needed on how teachers design instructional plans to meet the needs of all students in a multilevel heritage language classroom where students vary linguistically, culturally, and ethnically. While there are not adequate resources of teaching materials, and the developed

instruction for heritage language does not follow a “one size fits all” rule, “the stronger language instruction becomes, the better teachers meet HL learners’ needs” (Pérez, 2010, p.76).

Teaching methodologies and materials play a vital role in helping the students (re)learn a new language as a second/foreign language as well as keeping learners interested and motivated throughout their learning journey. Inspired by my commitment to preserving the Persian language as my home language, I aim to investigate the teaching methodologies that three Persian teachers apply in their teaching and how they incorporate the funds of knowledge approach in their classrooms. I narrate my observation of different faces of funds of knowledge that teachers bring to their classrooms to illustrate the approach’s applicability to Persian language education. Finally, I demonstrate how funds of knowledge stretch beyond the Persian language classroom and structural aspects of language.

### **Theoretical framework**

The heritage language is the marker of the ethnic identity of minority groups and immigrants. The ethnic identity contains cultural, social, historical, and personal values according to which the people socialize and practice their traditions. Heritage language speakers have their cultural ceremony, network, and traditional practices all of which are inspired by ethnic identity (Chow, 2001). Therefore, speakers of a heritage

language are often concerned about maintaining or sharing the ethnic/heritage language with their children and future generations. Heritage language educators, scholars, and speakers long to develop good educational programs to save the language competence of the speakers and help students (re)learn their ethnic language as a second or heritage language.

The foundation of this study is the “funds of knowledge” approach to teaching and learning which Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma González (1992) describe as “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (1992, p. 133). González & Moll (2002) believe that students learn meaningfully through making a connection between the newly taught content and their life. To apply “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al, 1992) for learning a new language, language teachers mediate new concepts using learners’ background knowledge in the process of their learning. Agar (1994) believes that incorporating learners’ cultural and social knowledge into materials and activities can make the content comprehensible. In other words, to learn meaningfully, the students should have interaction with meaningful materials. Teachers have a significant responsibility to make materials, texts, vocabulary, or grammar understandable to help students internalize new content.

One feature of a heritage language classroom is that teachers are fluent in the language they are teaching so they are a rich source of written and oral input for students. Still, we might question whether Persian language proficiency alone makes a language teacher qualified to teach a second language. Wang (2009) learned through her observational data in 2008 STARTALK <sup>3</sup> that heritage language teachers are mostly immigrants who have undergraduate degrees; these credentials are not necessarily related to language education. Persian language teachers are no exception; they come to the classroom with different educational backgrounds such as linguistics, literature, and majors unrelated to second language education.

A teacher's particular funds of knowledge are a rich source of the activities, strategies, and materials that language teachers bring into their classroom. Moll (2012) believes that it is especially important to understand how teachers' life experiences interact with the academic and pedagogical knowledge and concepts needed to succeed as professional educators. The heritage language teachers' funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) create and enhance the learning context for the student to grow in their learning and their abilities to use their language. Integrating teachers' funds of knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> <https://startalk.umd.edu/public/>

approach to teaching and learning provides the opportunity for learners to extend the reach of language application beyond the classroom setting and provide meaningful engagement in language. In this approach, the world that teachers and students bring to the classroom can be the main source of teaching and learning materials.

This article studies the teachers' funds of knowledge-based methods in their teaching practices. Through the ethnographic case studies of three beginning level Persian language classrooms, I explore how the teachers' methods have manifested this approach. The materials, activities, and strategies of each teacher serve as additional data. I also explore scaffolding strategies teachers use to make the materials understandable and comprehensive for their language learners.

### **Literature Review**

The United States is described as a cradle of diverse languages and cultures which play a main role in the richness of the society (Cummins, 2005). This richness and diversity is achieved in part by immigrants who have left their countries behind to live in the receiving country. However, socializing with two different groups of people can be challenging for immigrants who navigate two different languages and cultures while caring for their children's language and ethnic identity.

The immigration of Iranians to the U.S. has occurred at different times and because of religious, political, and



educational reasons (Modarresi (2001). As the number of immigrants increases, concern about preserving home language and culture also increases. Heritage language teachers often find themselves teaching learners who speak English as their first language. Heritage language learners seek to become literate in their heritage language and improve that language as their second language.

With increasing numbers of immigrants moving between borders and countries, and the importance of bilingualism among families, interest in language learning is increasing. There are about 29 Persian programs in the US universities (Sedighi, 2010) that offer the Persian language courses to students with the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels in Middle Eastern Studies, Iranian Studies, Foreign Language departments, or Critical Language Programs. The main concern of heritage language speakers and educators is how to retain the ethnic language after living for some years in an English speaking country. Practices in the heritage language classroom can “delay or reverse language loss” (Valdés, 2005, p: 16).

According to Richards & Rodgers (1986), teaching approach, design, and procedure are included within the overall concept of method, “an umbrella term for the specification and interrelation of theory and practice” (p. 16). Language teaching methods can be defined as a combination

of a teacher's instructional practices and the learner's learning activities deployed within the language acquisition setting. Key differences between approaches include differences in the goals, strategies, motivational orientations, assessments, and student interactions. The methods selected by language teachers depend on their educational philosophies, classroom demographics, subject area, and school mission statements (Thamarana, 2015). In the three Persian language classrooms included in this study, I documented various methods such as the Grammar Translation Method, Audio Visual Method, Communicative Approach, Task-Based Method, and funds of knowledge approach. In what follows, I describe each method and common features.

#### 4. **Grammar-Translation Method**

The grammar-translation method (GTM), predominant from 1840-1940, was the first foreign language teaching method (Wright, 2010). It was used for teaching the structural aspects of language such as grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Often the goal was to train students to translate texts into English, particularly from classical languages like Latin and Greek. This language teaching methodology is mainly “structure drill-based” (Lin, 2010). In the GTM, teachers use invented sentences instead of real sentences. Classes are usually conducted in the first language while students learn grammar rules through rote memorization and mechanical drills, such as substituting, writing and answering

sentences, or filling in a word gap. These classrooms are overwhelmingly teacher-centered, in which teachers position themselves as sole-speaker and all-knower.

While this method can help language learners recognize correct grammar, vocabulary, and comprehend written texts, learners rarely become competent in using the language in a real context. They sit passively and wait for the teacher to tell them what to do and what to say. Students learn to focus on assignments and due dates. When used to teach contemporary languages, the grammar-translation method fails to provide students with verbal opportunities to apply their newly learned knowledge about the language outside of the classroom (Wright, 2010).

### 5. **Audio-Lingual Method**

The audio-lingual method (ALM) was used well into the 1980s to teach language learners about the linguistic structure of their second language (Wright, 2010). Language instruction is in the target language. The goal of this method is to provide fluency in everyday conversation and is also characterized by a “drill and kill” approach, with students repeating after the teacher without “systematic practice to fulfill specific functions in the learning process” (DeKeyser, 2010, p: 159). Learners are unable to independently produce fluent conversation in the second or foreign language after years of study (Wright, 2010). In the audiolingual language classroom, teachers prioritize the

acquisition of native-like pronunciation and intonation through memorization and repetition of structural drills. In contrast to the grammar-translation method, audiolingual methods place less emphasis on grammar rules. Learners practice language skills through rote learning, rather than expressing their ideas. Indeed, students have difficulty transferring acquired patterns to real-world communication. Many language learners find themselves unable to move from their memorized structures and sentences to create discourse based on real-life needs (Richards, 2006)

The audio-lingual language teaching method, as well as the behaviorist view supporting it, was challenged in the 1970s by linguist Noam Chomsky (Wright, 2010). In his book, *Syntactic Structures* (1957), Chomsky argued that language learning involves creative processes and that all languages are biological and rule-governed. Chomsky suggested language acquisition as innate, and that, “given exposure to a specific language, children will naturally create the specific rules of that language for themselves. Learning is thus seen as a process of discovery determined by internal processes rather than external influences” (Willis 2004, pp. 4–5). Terrell (1977) in collaboration with Stephen Krashen developed the “natural approach,” which emphasized the need for teachers to use comprehensible input in the classroom so that students could acquire a second language and its structures naturally.

## 6. **Communicative Language Teaching**

In sociocultural theory, the disparity between teachers' expectations and students' performance is solved by considering the students' needs, abilities, and experiences (Correa, 2011). Before the emergence of sociocultural theory and teaching methods that emerged from this theory, language classrooms were more teacher-centered. The new era of teaching includes learner-centered classrooms in which the learners can have a constructive and collaborative dialogue with instructors; students learn in ways that are meaningful to them rather than learn based on what instructors expect them to learn. Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a newer method in second language teaching that focuses on the interaction between learners and teachers, and learners and their peers (Richards, 2006). According to CLT, learners benefit more from communicating with second-language speakers than from recognizing grammar rules and having a passive knowledge of vocabulary. The communicative method encourages students to practice a second or foreign language using authentic subjects and interactive activities (Correa, 2011). Learners are prompted to talk or write about their lives using the words and structures they have learned. This approach allows language learners to present their voices, identities, interests, and challenges in their written or spoken language.

## 7. **Task-Based Method**

In the task-based method, students are assigned a meaningful task or activity such as a scavenger hunt, interviewing, or retelling a story (Wright, 2010). To engage in the task, students interact with their teacher, other people, or with their classmates. Nunan (2004) gives an example of a task-based activity:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge to express meaning and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle, and an end (p. 4).

The task-based method asks learners to undertake an activity from the very first day to the last so that they consciously or unconsciously engage with language in similar

projects throughout the class. The advantage of the task-based method is that students have the opportunity to develop their cognitive language skills such as presenting, discussing, convincing, or writing (Nunan, 2004). Another strength of this method is the context that teachers create by assigning a task. Learning in a real context is more meaningful than working with words, sentences, and grammar isolated from real situations in which they are used.

#### 8. **Funds of Knowledge Approach**

Students learn more effectively if they find some connection between new subject material and the knowledge in their lives, rather than being asked to learn isolated facts and rules (González & Moll, 2002). Mediation artifacts in heritage language education are tools, signs, and artifacts that are transferred across generations and contribute to the funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) for second language education. To apply this framework to teaching and learning a new language, teachers mediate the new concepts and contents through using learners' home and community knowledge in the process of teaching. Moll and Greenberg (1990) believe that mediation is used in "helping to create more advanced social circumstances for teaching and learning" (p. 320).

Teaching discrete aspects of a new language will not help learners apply the learning in their lives unless those aspects are mediated through various strategies. For example,

in Moll et al (1992), the authors describe how a teacher used the summer experience of one student in Mexico while teaching about candy making. Teachers connect students' funds of knowledge and life outside the classroom to enhance teaching. To provide these contexts, the teacher needs to make their teaching understandable and comprehensive through contextualizing new content and lessons. Contextualizing new information assists and motivates students toward learning the materials in class (Perin, 2011).

To integrate teaching methodologies with the funds of knowledge approach, teachers bridge the gap between the language of the textbook and the authenticity of the language being taught in the classroom. Teachers play an important role in providing an appropriate environment for instructional conversation (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991) and interactional opportunities between teachers and learners, learners and learners, and learners and the materials. This type of integration ensures students' strengths work for them.

In contrast, teachers who teach based on pre-planned materials and textbooks to deliver grammar and vocabulary do not keep their teaching dynamic, which inhibits change and newness in their teaching. Often the funds of knowledge that teachers consciously or unconsciously bring into their teaching method are not made explicit because teachers are not aware of this approach or how to use it. The funds of knowledge



approach also focuses on how teachers' culture and history are perceived or considered in classroom teaching methods, materials, content, and activities (Gonzales and Moll, 2002).

Vygotsky (1978) theorized the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). In a heritage language classroom, scaffolding strategies are necessary to help learners process the “comprehensible input” necessary for their understanding and learning (Krashen, 1985). Scaffolding provides various ways for teachers to accommodate learners as they encounter new vocabulary, grammar, or other aspects of a new language (Correa, 2011).

Scaffolding is a “dialogically produced interpsychological process through which learners internalize knowledge they co-construct with more capable peers” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, 282). Scaffolding is an interpretation of the ZPD in which the adult or teacher mediates pedagogical elements beyond the learner's mental capacity (Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976). Scaffolding allows the language learner to engage in an activity that is within her range of abilities and also just beyond her range of ability. Undertaking activities, pictures, and games are examples of “scaffolding tools” (Mercer, 1995).

Other scaffolding tools and techniques include bringing the funds of knowledge approach to make classroom content more comprehensible to learners, simplifying the steps learners must take to complete a task, and providing a model for learners.

Contextualizing content and new information assists and motivates students to learn the class material (Perin, 2011). Taylor & Mulhall (1997) defined contextualization as using the materials and content related to the knowledge, culture, and environments of the learners. Agar (1994) maintained that bringing students' history and culture into the classroom can be achieved by doing activities that incorporate student knowledge. In this way, teachers can integrate students' resources into their methodology to make the content comprehensible and contextualized.

Moll and Gonzalez (1999) have argued that students' funds of knowledge are a great source for creating contextualized materials for the learning of minority students. Indeed, "when a teacher incorporates household funds of knowledge into the curriculum and uses dialogic teaching methods, students are liberated to direct their own learning" (Floyd-Tenery, 1995, p.12 in Brinton et al). Teachers who include students' funds of knowledge help students understand the material while also allowing students to find themselves and their identities represented in the classroom curriculum.

This inclusion of students' prior knowledge helps them take more ownership and responsibility for their learning and helps students connect their classroom to their real life. Teachers who do not take outside and community resources for granted "give more meaning to the learning experiences of the students" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p.336). In a heritage language classroom, connecting students' homes with classroom subjects allows students to deeply understand the materials.

The increase in the number and diversity of second language learners suggests that no single method of teaching and learning a second language will be effective for all learners. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses and heritage language teachers need to develop an eclectic approach. Brown (2002) stated that an eclectic approach provides the solution to the problems that language teachers may face during their teaching. This approach allows second language teachers to select the strategy, activity, and material which work within their educational context. That is, teachers feel more freedom to rely on different methodologies rather than being limited by a single one.

### **Methodology**

Hymes (1996) states that ethnography is a qualitative research method in which the researcher takes a cultural lens to study people within their communities (Hammersley & Atkinson,

2007). My methods are inspired by Heath (1983), whose research in two American cities took place over 10 years, during which time she lived with the residents while observing their language and learning practices.

This study constitutes a mini-ethnography exploring three Persian language classroom communities. Using ethnographic methods, I observed, tracked, and interviewed three Persian language teachers. Interviews with the participants were occasionally long and informal and loosely ordered. While observing classroom interactions, I took notes and did a “mental” analysis at the same time. These reflections became an important part of my study sources. I audio recorded each classroom session and interview. My data includes audio recordings of the classrooms, my notes, and recorded interviews. I observed the classrooms and noted what the three Persian teachers did in their classrooms and how they use textbooks and materials, strategies, and activities as a way of discovering what their teaching philosophies are. Through on-the-ground observations, I noted the interaction teachers had with learners, other teachers, and teaching materials and activities. I analyzed and interpreted the data set, including all pedagogical activities developed by teachers, any scaffolding and materials used by them to ease learners’ understanding and learning of new content during Persian language learning.

## **The Study**

To begin the study, I emailed a survey to members of a professional organization to which I also belong -- the American Association of Teachers of Persian (AATP). I sent this email to 32 teachers; 8 responded by completing the survey. Two of them just wrote their names without completing the survey. Some email recipients provided several reasons why they had to decline my request. In addition to the email survey and invitation, I relied on a more traditional method of obtaining participants -- making phone calls. I started with two teachers from the conference on heritage languages that I attended in California, who were living in an urban area where the number of Persian language speakers was relatively high. I asked them about their classrooms, their class schedules, and the number and diversity of their language learners. I selected their classes as my research sites due to their willingness to participate. I chose the third participant of this study through the questionnaire that I had sent.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What is the second language teaching methodology of each Persian language teacher?
2. What are the sources/faces of teachers' funds of knowledge in their teaching practices?
3. How do teachers' funds of knowledge affect the way they teach a lesson?

## **Research Settings and Participants**

The data collection of this mini-ethnographic research is a part of an inquiry around three classrooms located in three universities in the U.S. I triangulated the research methods for this study, with teachers, learners, and materials as the focus of analysis. I spent three weeks at each site observing my research participants. I started my observation at Mountain University in 2016, September 29 – October 19 for three weeks. Then I attended one Persian class at Coastal University in 2016, October 20 – November 9. Lowland University was the last site that I went to, where I spent about three weeks in 2016, November 11- November 30, to observe this Persian language classroom.

### **Sima**

Sima taught in the Middle Eastern Studies department of **Coastal University** in the US. This Persian course was offered three days a week for 6 hours over 15 weeks. She holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern Studies-History and had been teaching the Persian language for 28 years at the time of the study. Sima cooperated with other Persian teachers in developing textbooks for Persian language learners. She worked mainly on reading and writing, but occasionally tried to teach her students how to understand and speak Persian.

In Sima's class, there were 12 students with various Persian linguistic and cultural backgrounds; these students

were learning Persian as a second/heritage or a foreign language. Six language learners demonstrated some level of proficiency in Persian because they had been raised by two Persian-speaking parents. Four language learners had gained a low level of cultural and linguistic knowledge through limited exposure to Persian because one of their parents was a Persian language speaker. The other two students had no prior connection with the Persian language and culture. Sima taught three sessions per week; each session took 2 hours.

### **Afsaneh**

Afsaneh's Persian language classroom was offered five days a week for 5 hours over 15 weeks by the Near Eastern Languages and Cultures department at **Mountain University** in the U.S. Afsaneh received her Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies. Her expertise was in comparative literature and she had some experiences in developing textbooks for Persian language teaching. She had taught the Persian language for over 25 years.

There were 13 students in Afsaneh's classroom. Four students had been raised in a household where Persian was spoken, and three were competent in communicating in the Persian language. The fourth understood the language but was unable to speak in Persian. Two additional students had one Persian-speaking parent. Of these two, the one whose mother was Persian was more familiar with his heritage culture, whereas the other student was not. The other seven students

in the classroom were Egyptian, American, and Mexican students who were in the course to learn to communicate both in written form and orally.

### **Sepideh**

Sepideh's class was offered five days a week for 5 hours at **Lowlands** University in the U.S. Sepideh had a Master's in comparative literature in Italian and Persian. She had been teaching the Persian language for more than 6 years. In her classroom, there were 12 students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One of them had Iranian parents but was unable to communicate in Persian. Four students had one Iranian parent but were unable to use their heritage language, though they were to some extent culturally competent. The remaining seven students, from Korea and the United States, had no linguistic or cultural knowledge about Iran or the Persian language.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Primary data sources of this study included observation, field notes, interviews, and teachers' and students' artifacts. Formal and informal interviews with teachers were conducted outside of classroom time. In addition, I met with my focal teachers to debrief and clarify questions after each class. I audio recorded the open-ended responses of the teachers and then transcribed them with the software program called 'Transcribe Me'. Then, I read all the transcriptions carefully and looked for themes whereby to analyze them qualitatively.



For analysis, I used grounded theory to which I applied constant comparison (Strauss, 1987) of the pedagogical practices of teachers. Grounded theory is the generation of theory from data; I used Maxwell's definition (2005) of theory as inductively developed during a study and is in constant interaction with the data. Flick (2006) argues that "theories should not be applied to the subject being studied but are 'discovered' and formulated in working with the field and the empirical data to be found in it" (p. 98).

To accomplish the data analysis, I searched for categories connected to the research questions. I assigned codes such as "teaching materials", "teaching strategies", "classroom activities", "teachers' educational background", and "teachers' interest". After the initial coding process, I conducted a secondary coding of the data that I labeled "second language teaching methods" and "teachers' funds of knowledge" which were found in some subcategories that emerged in the data set.

My own experiences and expertise in second language teaching and learning inform part of my analysis. Much insight came from the funds of knowledge approach I used to make sense of my data and the literature about second language teaching and learning. Reflective accounts of this research also constitute an important part of my analysis. These accounts included my perceptions about the best teaching practices and

activities, materials, and participants' ideas. I studied the nature of those practices that I had coded to examine how teachers' funds of knowledge related to their pedagogical practices. For example, how their background affected or contributed to the materials they developed for the students, and how students received support from their teachers in their learning process. At this stage, based on the field notes, my conceptual memos, and interviews, I came up with a tentative list of findings. I then characterized teaching practices in which I could recognize "teaching methods" and the funds of knowledge. At the final stage, I reconnect the various codes to one another to develop a grounded theory.

### **Findings**

The initial idea was to explore how the students learn through their funds of knowledge. However, after analyzing the data, some versions of funds of knowledge that teachers brought to their classrooms were explored. In this section, I present the cases of three teachers whose experiences, education, and interests portray their funds of knowledge. I provide interview statements and my field notes that paint the picture of teaching methodologies, the faces of their funds of knowledge which affect the way they teach.

Funds of knowledge portray the knowledge, skills, experiences, expertise, and interests of an individual who has acquired them through their cultural, social, educational, and

historical interactions with other members in their community, family life, and even everyday living. Teachers bring their funds of knowledge into their classrooms because of the context in which they have grown up and studied. Being inspired by the perspectives of Vygotsky of how fruitful educational practice can be related to the funds of knowledge approach, Moll (2003) believes that “the teacher’s funds of knowledge become part and parcel of that, of that element needed to assimilate the pedagogical knowledge and become an outstanding teacher”.

What follows is a description of the teaching method of each teacher, the faces of their funds of knowledge, and how their funds of knowledge affect their teaching methodology. This narration is drawn from my interpretation of the teachers’ actions and words during classroom observations and participant interviews. This account provides more details about the teachers as agents of funds of knowledge. For each teacher, I describe their teaching methods, their funds of knowledge, and how their funds of knowledge inform their teaching.

## **Sima**

### **Teaching methods**

Sima’s instructional language was Persian even though a few students in her class did not fully understand the language. She explained the new content in English when she thought that her students needed more clarification. She worked on the

alphabet, grammar, vocabulary, translation, and reading. She also assigned two books to her students. The students had to complete some of the drills in the first textbook, find and write the translation and mainly synonyms of new vocabulary, and write sentences using the new words and grammar rules. The other textbook contained seven short stories in which she had simplified their words and structures. Most of the time, she narrated the “stories” behind the words, connected them to the lives of the students and her own life, and created the context for new content. For example:

After conducting a warm-up activity, she spends 10 minutes of her class reviewing the lesson that she had taught in the last session. She asks the students the meaning of words and their synonyms to assess their learning (Field note, November 2016).

To teach grammar or vocabulary, first, she explained the grammatical rule, then she wrote the rule and an example on the whiteboard:

She asked students to find the synonyms of the new words for the next session. As a part of their homework, students had to write

some new sentences in which the new vocabulary and grammar rule was used (Field note, November 2016).

One of the activities through which Sima created a real context for students was a warm-up activity or a way to present the new material to students. Using their funds of knowledge, students had to write something interesting on the whiteboard about themselves and read it aloud to the class. During this exercise, I observed:

Shadi, a heritage language learner, who was thinking of her sentence, asked about the meaning of “water polo” in Persian. The teacher opened the discussion on this word by saying that there was a game that used to be played by Iranian kings and princes a long time ago. She continued that the new version of that Old Persian game is now called water polo and in Persian, it is “چوگان آبی” – “water polo” (Field note, November 2016).

In another session, Sima wanted to teach the grammar rule of a sentence that people use in informal language. She wrote on the whiteboard “خوردمش” (I ate it) and explained how

students needed to connect the verb with the pronoun in the informal form of the verb. To make the new grammar rule understandable, she shared a memory of her mother who had come home and wanted to eat something: “My mom asked: “غذا کوش؟” which means “where is the food”? I said: خوردمش meaning “I ate it” whose formal form is “آن را خوردم.”” The student sitting behind me laughed as if she had experienced that moment. Sima linked this memory and experiences of the students through the stories that she narrated in her class.

Sima used mainly project-based learning in her classes. For instance, the students were assigned a final project on which they had to work from the beginning of the semester. The task was an interview project in which the students had to select a Persian-speaking family member or friend to interview. When the students had their questions ready, they scheduled an appointment with the person they were to interview. The interview had to be video-recorded because they needed to watch it to take notes about the information collected. Then they made a presentation using all information, photos, and a part of the video to present to the class at the end of the semester on “Presentation Day.” This project required students to interact with Persian language speaking family members or friends.

## **Funds of Knowledge**

### **- *Educational Background***

Sima has a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern Studies, Persian literature and history and her master's degree in Iranian studies. She has not formally studied theories and methodologies of second language teaching. However, her experiences of teaching the Persian language, dealing with the issues of Persian language learners, participating in heritage language conferences, and cooperating with other educators to develop textbooks have impacted her teaching practices. In her interview, she explained:

My background is in the history of Iran because of which I take lots of historical text to the class. Sometimes my students start nagging and ask me 'if this is a history class or if it is a Persian language class?' (Teacher's interview, October 2016)

Sima assigns classic and modern literature including stories, and poems, for students to work on. They read a story, find the synonyms of important words, discuss and write some sentences or paragraphs using those words:

For Mother's day or Norouz, I ask my students to do a project which is

reading a poem named “mother.” They have to learn its meaning, and practice to memorize and recite some verses of it depending on their language competency. We then go to a small green area at the university to have breakfast and each of them recites the poem. One of my students told me that she had gone home and read that poem for her mother and grandmother which brought them to tears. I assign a more difficult poem to read if my students’ Persian language is more proficient (Teacher’s interview, October 2016).

This activity was an integration of teachers and the students’ funds of knowledge. Sima tried to keep a very deep connection between the language she was teaching and the culture of the language. For everything she was teaching, she had a story to tell to contextualize the new concept as a scaffolding strategy for making the input comprehensible for students.

- ***Personal interests***

Sima used to live in Iran. She had to immigrate to the US after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Sima’s interest in storytelling and sharing her memories of living in Iran was transferred to



her teaching practices. She taught new words and expressions through stories. For example, to teach the verb “to recognize,” which in Persian is “شناختن”. Sima used a familiar and understandable example— “Last year, when I had gone to Seattle, I abruptly saw my old teacher at the conference, and I didn’t recognize him at all”—in Persian.

She also connected her example to the story of “چوپان دروغگو” “liar shepherd” with the word “از قضا” meaning “abruptly”. She contextualized the new word through integrating her memory and the word from a story they had read before to make two words comprehensible for her students.

In another instance, when Sima was teaching a sentence “من می خواهم / من نمی خواهم” (meaning “I want/ I don’t want”), she referred to a story/memory from her father, mother, and sisters. She told the story of a long time ago when they were in Iran. She narrated her story all in Persian, saying, “We had gone to the bazaar to buy shoes. My father had wanted us to say “من اینو نمی خواهم” (meaning “I don’t want these”) if we liked the shoes; in case the shopkeeper might give us a discount.” She added, “My father did his best to buy something at the lowest price.” She also added one cultural point about Iran that “When people realize that you have bought something, they ask you about the price and might say

that ‘You have been fooled, I would buy it for you at a much cheaper price.’” Teaching one expression, proverb, or word in her class was not limited to abstract translation; rather students were guided into a new world hidden behind the new story she told.

### **How funds of knowledge inform teaching**

Sima’s primary teaching material was a grammar book and a vocabulary book through which the students learned the alphabet, grammar, and vocabulary of the Persian language. She had also developed a collection of seven Persian short stories for her class, and simplified the stories for the level of the students. As a part of the class activity, they read the stories and talked about the new words and grammar rules as well as the content of the stories. Based on the level of the class, Sima developed a project in which the students had to interview a family member. She explained,

The project about family has been very successful because of which they learn a lot. They should know where for example their grandmother is from, where she was raised, if she went to school, and why she came to the US (if she has) or why not? (Teacher’s interview, October 2016).

For this project, students had to provide video and pictures in their oral presentation. Sima successfully tried to connect the classroom with students' home, family, and cultures.

## **Afsaneh**

### **Teaching methods**

Afsaneh, who has an educational background in Near Eastern studies, taught mostly in English. She explained everything in English and sometimes in Persian. She incorporated translanguaging from English to Persian to translate some parts for the students. The focus of her teaching was vocabulary, grammar rules, reading, translation exercises, writing new letters and sentences using the words and collocations, and subjugating verbs. The students had one main textbook assigned for that semester. They had to learn vocabulary and grammatical rules by rote memorization and then practice drills in substituting, making sentences, answering questions, or filling in word gaps.

One of the activities that Afsaneh used in her class was the repetition of words and sentences either after she spoke them, or after listening to an audio file. This activity helped students improve their listening comprehension and enabled them to answer some of Afsaneh's questions. Then, they had to repeat each sentence after they listened to the audio files for a second time. Afsaneh played the role of all-knower who acted

like a talking dictionary; that is, she explained the meaning of the words. I noted:

In each session, the language learners are being bombarded by lots of words and sentences through reading and repeating them. If the teacher could provide more chances for the language to be used by the students, she could help her students better (Field note, November 2016).

Afsaneh also taught some basic sentences used for simple conversation which seemed to motivate the students and increase their interest in learning the language. She believed that:

By the end of the semester, they should know how to introduce themselves, say their age, job, and university major. They should also be able to talk about their family members such as how many brothers and sisters they have, what they are, as two examples. (Teacher's interview-late October 2016).

Sometimes, Afsaneh taught the students a collocation by reading from the book, translating, and asking the students to conjugate verbs. A few minutes before the class was over, she called on some students to make a sentence using the collocation. That activity seemed more challenging to the students because they were forced to come up with sentences about themselves and their real lives.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

#### **- *Educational Background***

Afsaneh has a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies. Her expertise is comparative literature in Persian and English. In the texts that she used as the teaching materials, there were few authentic texts from classic or modern literature. That is, there is little sign of her educational background in Persian literature, evident in the materials and activities she uses in the classroom (Field note, September 2016). One of the main activities the students did in this class was repeating words and sentences and making sentences through substituting exercises. Repeating the content is one good scaffolding strategy to help students learn. However, nothing in the classroom is related to Afsaneh's funds of knowledge.

#### **- *Personal interests***

Afsaneh's personal interests include politics and daily news about Iran and the US. She talked about political issues and daily news in English in the classroom. If she had provided part of her lesson about politics in Persian, that would have

been more useful for the language learners. For example, in one of the sessions, Afsaneh initiated a political discussion about the presidential election all in English rather than in Persian. She did not use that subject as an instructional subject through which her students could learn some new concepts or vocabulary. Farhad, one of Afsaneh's students who were not proficient in the Persian language and struggled to (re)learn his parents' language, explained:

that is good that our teacher brings up some subjects about politics and daily news, but I wish we had those discussions partly at least in Persian... you know, then I feel that I am learning some words or rules... sort of what we need ... (Student's interview, October 2016).

While political discussions may not suit all students, Afsaneh could have integrated her interest in politics to teach new words or sentences. Moreover, a lesson plan containing political news could include grammar, vocabulary, and an exploration of the meaning behind phrases that might be difficult for language learners. Speaking in Persian about relevant topics provides more input for the students so they feel that they are getting familiar with some political terms that they might read or hear in the daily news.

### **How funds of knowledge inform teaching**

Afsaneh assigned a book to her students that was based on grammar and vocabulary of the language. The students learned the Persian alphabet, grammatical rules, daily conversations, and expression through reading texts and many words, most of which had transliteration and meanings in front of them. At the beginning of the semester, transliteration helped the students get familiar with the pronunciation of Persian letters and words. The only homework assignment related to students' funds of knowledge was a question and answer task about the students' life. They asked their classmates questions while Afsaneh checked their conversation. She corrected their questions and answers if they made mistakes.

### **Sepideh**

#### **Teaching methods**

Sepideh used both languages to teach but preferred to use mostly English. To provide Persian input, she switched between English and Persian to teach new content. She taught the Persian alphabet, grammar rules, vocabulary, reading, writing, translating the words and sentences, and pronunciation. I observed:

Sepideh began each session with a “warm-up” activity through which the students had to say and write something in Persian related to daily

events. If students did not know how to write their sentences, they asked the teacher to help them. The students had the challenge of finding something that they could write on the board. (Field note, November 2016).

After each student came up to the board and wrote a word or sentence, Sepideh corrected them by writing above their words. Then, she started teaching two new letters along with the features of each letter such as script, pronunciation, the connecting status of the Persian Letters, and different shapes of the letters. At the board, each student created a word out of the individual letters that teachers had written. After that, each student had to read one sentence of the text in which the new letter was used.

The teacher then translated the sentences into English and asked the students to practice them in a paired work activity. Once a week, there was a role-play activity that included students' ideas and interests in particular sentences in the textbook. On Fridays, students watched a movie in Persian and then discussed its cultural, social, and linguistic aspects. The assignments and student projects included sentence making, filling in the gaps, writing a short paragraph, and completing pre-printed exercises from their textbooks.



## **Funds of Knowledge**

### **- *Educational Background***

Sepideh has a master's in comparative literature in Italian and Persian. Her background is not related to the Persian language, and she does not have any educational background in teaching a language. Her teaching practices come from working cooperatively with other Persian teachers whose expertise is in Persian literature, and from her previous teaching experience. In one of the activities assigned to her students, there was a project in which her students needed to choose a poem by an Iranian poet. Then, they were to read and memorize the poem. On that day, each student recited the poem by heart or read it as well as they could. The only connection between this project and funds of knowledge is that Sepideh assigned this project based on the funds of knowledge of her colleague teaching Persian which Moll calls "a cognitive resource for the class" (see Moll et al, 1990). That is, the funds of knowledge of her colleague became hers which helped her develop an activity for her class.

### **- *Personal interests***

Sepideh's interests and expertise include art and politics. She shared her interests in the classroom by incorporating cinema, music, plays, and photography as well as current political news which was the presidential election at that time. For example, in one instance, she came to class and started talking about the presidential election. She used both English and Persian while

talking about the subject. A few students asked her how to say a word in Persian and then used those words, as well. In another instance, she taught a new word “ظریف” (zarif), meaning “delicate”. In addition to explaining the meaning of it, she told students about a political character (Prime Minister) of Iran named “Zarif” and what he has done for Iran to give context to the new words that the students were to learn.

When I asked about the activities she did or planned to do, Sepideh named a few activities such as using clips from a famous avenue in Iran named “Lolagar Avenue” and showing some pictures that she had taken in Iran. She went to Iran almost every year and took photographs during the time she was there. She contextualized the content of her lessons by bringing her photos to the class and talking about them in Persian. It was a good example of providing context for the words as well as speaking about the culture and society in Iran through the real pictures that she showed her students.

### **How funds of *knowledge* inform teaching**

Sepideh assigned her class a book that contained the Persian alphabet, new vocabulary, short texts for students to read, writing practice, translating activity, and grammar rules. There was also a section called “extended reading” for students to practice their reading skills. In each lesson in the book, one new Persian letter is taught by introducing the script of the letter, with some sentences in which there are the words that

contain a new letter. There is also a section where students can write letters and words. The book is equipped with transliteration and translation of words and sentences. Transliteration gradually disappears as students progress to the middle of the book, but the translation of sentences and words remains until the end of the book. This was the only textbook Sepideh used for her class and she did not provide extra material.

Sepideh developed a warm-up activity at the beginning of each class as good practice for students who wanted to express themselves. When they didn't know the words, they asked her to help. There was a strong connection between the homework, midterm, and final project and funds of knowledge. Sepideh also assigned another teacher's funds-of-knowledge-based activity. She explained:

First, the students listen to a song, for example by Palette, Vagabond, and a contemporary singer, and then they have some time to work on memorizing it. They have to sing that song together, at the end of the semester. Otherwise, I rely more on their textbook for all their assignments (Teacher's interview, November 2016).

Sepideh chose that activity based on her interest in art and music.

This section was devoted to exploring the second language teaching methodologies of three Persian language teachers. Another significant part of this section was about finding the sources of their funds of knowledge and how they applied that approach in their lesson delivery, materials, and developed assignments for the language learners.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Each teacher in this study represents a different understanding and use of funds of knowledge in the heritage language learning classroom. Sima's represents a mix of teaching methods that consisted of the grammar-translation method and task-based method. Storytelling contextualized new content, portrayed worlds behind the new words, and added to her eclectic methodology. Sima focused mainly on grammar, translation, reading, and vocabulary and a big project that engaged the students. Her instruction language, Persian rather than English, represented a step away from the grammar-translation method.

The task-based method was another element of Sima's eclectic teaching methods. The project kept the students engaged with the Persian language through their work on the final product, teacher-student meetings, recording and listening to the audio file, preparing the presentation, and

giving a lecture about their interview findings. For Sima, each word has a world that she wanted to show her students through narrating a story. That is, she contextualized the new word or grammar rule through an example, a story, or a real memory from her life, interests, and education - her funds of knowledge. She used the method of storytelling to contextualize while teaching new concepts which opened the students' eyes to a new world. The portrayed worlds behind the words can be different for people because of their various background knowledge and experiences. She used her real-life examples for contextualizing new concepts or vocabulary and encouraged students to tell their real stories using new words and grammar rules.

Afsaneh represents mostly the grammar-translation method. She worked on vocabulary, translations, reading, and drill-based activities such as filling in the blank, substituting sentences, and making new ones based on the given samples. The students repeated sentences and then made one of their own using a clue and pattern. Afsaneh included a small portion of the audiolingual and communicative method in her eclectic language teaching methodology; however, the grammar-translation method was stronger than the other ones.

Sepideh most closely represents an eclectic method; however, her teaching methods relied on grammar-translation more than the other methods because she focused on

grammar, translation, vocabulary, and reading. Including authentic subjects in the warm-up and role-play activity indicated the communicative method was also at play in her class. Students practiced speaking and listening in the Persian language through the materials that Sepideh provided, such as films and short clips that they watched and talked about.

Analyzing the teaching practices of the three teachers in this study, I categorized their funds of knowledge based on their educational backgrounds and personal interests. For Sima, her educational background, Persian literature, and history overlapped with her personal interests. She included Persian poems, stories, and history in the materials of her classes. She simplified and contextualized the new contents such as story, poem, or even song of a singer. She kept the connection between the language she was teaching and the culture of the language by using Persian literature. For everything she taught, Sima had a story, memory, or example to contextualize the new concept.

Afsaneh studied Persian language and literature; however, she did not include her funds of knowledge in the materials she had developed for her students. Her teaching materials and activities did not originate from her educational background. However, her interest in the politics of Iran and the US informed the topics she brought into her classrooms. Politics could have had a specific place in the materials and

activities of the class if Afsaneh had used Persian while speaking about political events. She could have provided more input in Persian for the students. If she had contextualized the content of each session through her funds of knowledge, she could have made new points more understandable for students. While the teacher's funds of knowledge-based-materials need to be simplified and doable for language learners, if classroom materials are not integrated into students' lives, language learning is more challenging.

Sepideh's teaching methods and materials were not related to her educational background in Persian literature. Instead, she brought her personal interests into her teaching. Connecting her real-world experiences of Iran with the context of her class allowed her to share the cultural and societal issues of Iran and make them real for the learners. Sharing pictures and videos of Iran provided the students a better sense of, for example, where Iran is, how people dress, what they do, and what they eat for breakfast. Sepideh also spoke about the geography of Tehran, and what the city is famous for. Her lesson delivery and presentations consistently contextualized the words, concepts, and content as part of Persian culture, food, streets, people, and dress to the Persian language learners. She mainly focused on classwork and homework, so she did not assign a final project.

Assigning a task-based final project is helpful for heritage language learners because it engages them in topics of interest to them and the teacher. Typically, the features of what is often called the task-based method include a) questions that contain meaningful content related to real-life, b) research on topics that allow students to learn about the culture of the language they are learning, applying the concepts in their presentation, and giving feedback, c) collaboration between students and teacher and d) use of technological tools for presenting their findings. These projects create the required contexts for students to engage with learning new concepts, contents, and culture. This also affords opportunities to investigate, interact, read, and write about what they are to present to the teacher and the whole class. Sima was the only teacher who used the task-based method in the final project for her students.

Findings in this study indicate that being a native speaker of a heritage language is not enough for successful teaching. Heritage language teachers need to be educated for second language teaching to help students learn successfully.

### **Conclusion**

The heritage language classroom isn't a "neutral space" and teaching a new language is not a matter of transferring information about the discrete parts of the language to the students. Rather, language teaching is an act of transferring a



message in an interactive context among learners. It is a skill, a profession, and an art. Second and foreign language teachers need to consider their funds of knowledge in their teaching, acknowledging that students need help in different and accessible ways. The best language teaching methods are therefore those that apply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language but allow students to produce when they are “ready,” recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production. (Krashen, 1977). Furthermore, sociocultural theory points to the notion that language is acquired through interaction in an interactive context (Vygotsky, 1973).

Teaching methods that contextualize the language and bring students into the present time use of language is most effective. Second language teachers should be aware of the importance of their students’ backgrounds because the cultural side of a second language is an important aspect that teachers need to contextualize. Most often, it is not just language that is to be spoken but the expression of culture, thoughts, emotions, and interpersonal bonds. Teachers’ personal and cultural backgrounds also affect their teaching methods. When second language teachers and learners bring their funds of knowledge

into the classrooms, funds of knowledge act as a scaffolding pedagogical strategy.

Teachers who do not have a language education background can attend workshops to get a license/certificate. For example, the aim of the STARTALK<sup>4</sup> project is to improve the expertise of heritage language teachers and create opportunities for them to share their experiences with other teachers. This project provides a “teacher effectiveness checklist, a teacher knowledge and skills matrix, and a tool for assessing teacher development” (Wang, 2009, p. 287). However, a few day-long workshops might not be enough to educate teachers to approach heritage/non-heritage learners in the best way. Wang believes “even “traditional” teacher candidates for commonly taught languages have become too diverse to be treated with one-size-fits-all certification/licensure requirement” (ibid, 2009, p. 284). Second language teachers must ask themselves a series of questions to improve their teaching methods and materials - are the students enjoying the class time? Are they bored? How much of their language learning can be used outside of class? How much of the course content can they apply in their daily lives? What strategies, materials, and activities will help students learn?

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<sup>4</sup> STARTALK is a federal grant program funded by the National Security Agency and administered by the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland.

The Persian second language teachers in this study need more pedagogic training in second/foreign language learning. The more they know about the language teaching, the richer their funds of knowledge will become; therefore, they will be more able to make the Persian language learning a joyful journey for students. Many of the methods described in this study elicit responses in students such as frustration, hyper-focus on structural points, and disappointment with the experience of (re)learning a new language. Skilled language teachers adapt teaching methods to accommodate different types of learners and their needs. Most language teaching today emphasizes oral communication, although many second language teaching programs place greater emphasis upon written aspects of language, i.e. grammatical mastery and reading.

This study is a mini-ethnography that aims to explore Persian language teachers' funds of knowledge and how funds of knowledge impact teaching methods. Because the sample size is small, it is difficult to make generalizations. However, the study demonstrates the second language education requirements of language teachers. Although there has been considerable research on the linguistic aspects of Persian language learning and teaching, little pedagogical attention has been given to Persian teaching methodologies (Sedighi, 2010). This study was designed and conducted to fill this gap in the

literature. I hope that this research may serve as a model for helping language teachers enrich their second-language-teaching-based funds of knowledge to improve their teaching. While in a heritage-speaking family, parents and children are being separated “by the wall of words” (Chow, 2001, p. A01), educators should not let that wall get thicker, which leads to intergenerational conflict and communication breakdowns as well as the loss of language and ethnic identity.

Table 1. Meaning and Transcriptions of Persian Words

Persian Script	“Literal” Translation	Meaning in Context
چوگان آبی	Chogān-e-ābi	Water polo
غذا کوش؟	Ghazā koosh	Where’s the food?
خوردَمِش/ آن را خوردم	Khordamesh/ ān rā khordam	I ate it
چوپان دروغگو	Choopān e Dorooghgoo	liar shepherd
من می خواهم / من نمی خواهم	Man mikhām/man nemikhām	I want/ I don’t want
من اینو نمی خواهم	Man ino nemikhām	I don’t want these (shoes)
ظریف	Zarif	Delicate/foreign minister of Iran

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