

THE SAUDI EFL STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF USING ARABIC IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

The debate between the first language (L1) and foreign language (L2) acquisition has intensified in many institutions, particularly where English is embraced as a foreign language (EFL). Based on this background, this paper investigated the perceptions of teachers and learners regarding the issue posed by employing the use of Arabic in English classrooms. This study embraced the use of both interviews and questionnaires to test the educators' and learners' attitudes towards this issue at the Saudi tertiary level. The results of the study reported that teachers and learners were positive with using Arabic in English lessons. Moreover, the results also revealed that the research subjects in the study favored the use of the Arabic language during certain occasions that mattered. The findings of this study indicated that the first language was vital and that teachers could use it not only for instructional purposes but also a medium that would foster learning experience amongst the learners. Nevertheless, despite the teachers and the learners sharing similar sentiments, the study also captured areas where their thoughts and opinions differed.

Keywords: L1 and L2; Arabic in EFL classes; teachers' attitudes; classroom management.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the first language alongside the second language has generated increasing debates in most institutions for a long time. The discussion between the switch between the two languages has been linked to the dissemination of quality learning processes for the students. Whereas proponents attribute this discourse to enhancing the learning process, opponents have been quick to express their views on the disregard of the students' mother tongue in their lessons. Although the uproar is resonating in the air against the use of the first language, it is widely used in most classroom contexts. Given such rising matters from the debate, it is inevitable to make decisions on whether to support or disdain the use of the first language without proper research inquiry. During the last few decades, the use of L1 in the L2 contexts has gained wide recognition. Many authors have since conducted numerous studies, regarding this debatable research, with mixed approach either supporting or maintaining a traditionalist stance on the use of L2 language as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Studies conducted have attributed the embrace of L2 in exposing students to a wide area of understanding and learning processes. According to Krashen (1982), L2 provides learners with that requisite exposure where they can master the art of grasping components of the learned language. Moreover, Cook (2001) shares similar sentiments by asserting that L2 improves the collaborative nature of students where they share ideas openly. Nevertheless, Macaro (1997) stipulates that the wide use of L2 in a classroom setting can lead to the ultimate restriction of L1. In this regard, Swain (2000) attributes that this would further

enhance the learner's ability to learn and understand the foreign language proficiently. More discussion is presented in the next section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature In the process of learning a new language, it has been suggested that a specific core language should be present. In this context, Krashen (1982) elucidates that learners should be tasked with the responsibility of mastering the learned language through significant exposure to that particular language. Conducted research studies have provided evidence on existing relationships between learners' success in mastering the language when exposed to that target language (Carroll, 1975).

When learners have good exposure to the target language, this will enhance their learning. Moreover, these attempts to master the language are coupled with the significance that the process carries in relation to the learning environment (Cook, 2001; MacDonald, 1993; Inbar-Lourie, 2010). Therefore, teachers have an important role in ensuring that learners are given the necessary support to prepare them in the process of encountering the target language. Despite the significant influence between L1 and L2, studies queried the omission of the former in the latter's classroom setting (Turnbull, 2001; Macaro, 2001; Van Lier, 1995). Nevertheless, many teachers have voiced their concern regarding the use of L1 in an L2 classroom. As such, teachers' reluctance to use L1 in foreign learning could be attributed to the fact that they want to expose their students to the target language, thus, its exemption (Cook, 2001; Van Lier, 1995). Definitely, there is no direct connection about how L1 can be harnessed and utilized alongside L2 learning. There is a cohort of studies that point out that L2 should be employed and used with the exception of L1. The indication of such reasoning is further met with grave concerns about some critical factors that need further explanation using the L1 in an L2 context (Ferrer, 2005; Cook, 2001). In the following section, this study highlights views from proponents of L1 stipulating its use in foreign language classrooms.

Proponents of L1

It is vital to note the various reasons for augmenting the discussion between the first and second language acquisition. From these discussions, the first language has dominantly provided guidance on the underlying factors that promote second language acquisition (Slabakova, 2016). However, an argument still exists over how second language acquisition (SLA) should be correlated with the L1 acquisition. Cook (2001) acknowledges that there is a staggering difference between the L1 and L2 acquisition insisting the importance of L1 to enhance the language learning process. Accordingly, there are various ways a learner could learn the L2, also with the use of the first language in the process (Madriñan, 2014; Silverberg & Samuel, 2004). Macaro (2001) asserts excluding L1 in an L2 context is not justifiable because learners usually look for support from L1 to enhance their understanding of the learning process. Harbord (1992) shares similar sentiments by asserting that in the context where teachers have used only the English language, multiple misunderstandings and dislikes occur amongst the learners. On the one hand, these failures indicate that the L1 plays a vital role in the classroom because learners can cope with the L2 through enhanced language analysis, explanation, and confirm that the grammar meets the required standards. On the other hand, Mukattash (2003) presents a scenario that characterizes the use of the mother tongue in EFL teaching where it has fostered and provided learners with the needed framework to understand needed leads for effective learning processes.

In his assertion, Cook (2001) details the relaxation and the resulting favorable learning environment created when teachers use L1 in a foreign language classroom. According to Collingham (1988), Campbell (1997), and Piasecka (1998), the use of L1 in such a setting does not elevate the morale of the students but also motivates and encourages them to learn. Conducted studies indicate that the use of L2 only may negatively impact chances of students explaining themselves concisely and the understanding of the learning process might be diminished (Slabakova, 2016). Furthermore, employing only L2 as a medium of instruction is debatable given the instances where students are unable to comprehend what the teacher teaches them, and subsequently, it becomes difficult to ascertain the relevance of the teaching process in that context. Moreover, Sharwood-Smith (1985) points out that subjecting learners to L2 only hinders their knowledge of perceiving the complexity of conforming to the L2 language system. Toward the need to maximize the learning process, Turnbull provides an assessment suggesting the inclusion of L1 in the learning discourse and not using L2 exclusively. Similarly, Van Lier (1995) elaborates that the use of L1 provides a breakthrough in the learning process because students can encounter meaningful intake.

Opponents of L1 use

Despite the acquired consensus in the studies above, many researchers have discussed the use of L1 in L2 classrooms; opponents have voiced their discontent and further suggested the sole use of L2 for teaching and learning process. Accordingly, the opponents assert that the use of L2 propagates the acquisition of L2 more easily than when interrupted by the inclusion of L1. There is a recognition for the L2 gaining momentum in enabling learners to acquire the needed skills and knowledge for grasping the needed L2 grammar and vocabulary (Caroll, 1975; Krashen, 1982).

Many researchers have supported the exclusion of L1 in the learning because learners are given the full exposure to the target language, which is an essential element to enhance the language acquisition process (Duff & Polio, 1994, 1990; Chambers, 1991; Atkinson, 1987). The concept specifying that L2 provides the foundation for L2 acquisition remains relevant to the view that L1 does not in any way ascertain its importance; thus the need to exclude it in the teaching and learning in the respective L2 classroom settings. The argument posed by the exclusive use of L1 in a classroom context indicates fear of its dominance. In another context, MacDonald (1993) argues that L2 should be used so that students acknowledge its essence and subsequently realize how to navigate through its communicative functions. The need to expose students to L2 enables teachers to position the teaching process where the learners are ready to use the language right away and not any other time sooner (Turnbull, 2001). Moreover, researchers opine that the use of L1 while teaching in L2 classroom contradicts what is learned and that students sometimes lose focus in the learning process when L1 is used interchangeably with L2 (MacDonald, 1993; Chambers, 1991).

In a study conducted by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), the findings report that it was not appropriate to employ L1 because this would certainly ruin the essence of L2 teaching. MacDonald (1993) indicates that the switch between L1 and L2 limits students from pushing toward digging deep into the language, an aspect that undermines the learning process. Therefore, this study aims at examining the teachers' use of the Arabic language in an English classroom setting in Saudi university levels. It also aims at investigating teachers' and learners' opinion on the use of L1 while learning the English language. The following are the research questions that the study aims to answer:

1. What is the Saudi students' attitude towards using Arabic in the classroom settings?

2. What are the situations that make teachers use Arabic in English lessons?

This study was conducted on respondents who were undertaking their undergraduate studies with some commanding academic excellence. It is vital to note that with the exception of the Arabic language and the Islamic study, all other courses are instructed in the English language. The other criteria are the rules specifying where the English language is identified as the medium of instruction as directed by the University.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The teachers, as research subjects of the study, were recruited from Qassim University. Identified with pseudonyms, the three male teachers were selected with regard to meeting the criteria of comprehending both the Arabic and English languages. As such, it was confirmed that the teachers were not only certified but they had also been trained in the local universities around the country. Moreover, the teachers also met the required teaching experience of more than three years. They were selected because they taught the same class that was populated with the student participants. Additionally, forty freshman students undertaking their undergraduate studies were recruited from the same university were also involved in this research study. The students met the criteria where Arabic was their first language and that they had ages between 19 and 25 years old.

Data collection

Data collection for this study was done through questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaire aimed to capture the students and teachers views, opinions, and thoughts regarding their preferred language to be used in the classroom. It is vital that the questionnaire was formulated using the Arabic language to eliminate any misunderstanding that might threaten the participants' responses to the questionnaire items. For the interviews, they were undertaken with the purpose of qualifying the information sought from the teachers and students on various viewpoints regarding their underlying reasons and attitudes toward the use of L1 as a medium of instruction in the class. The instrument consisted of semi-structured questions that stimulated participants to expound more on their reasons and answers to the questions.

Data analysis

Data collected was categorized and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics tests were used. The dataset also was subjected to testing and subsequent inferential statistics using the SPSS 21.0 software. In addition to measuring the frequencies of the responses given in the study, information drawn from the qualitative analysis was used to qualify the numbers drawn from the descriptive and inferential statistics.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Attitudes towards using L1 inside the classroom

What is the Saudi students' attitude toward using Arabic in the classroom settings?

From the study, it was established that the majority of respondents consisting of teachers and students preferred the use of the Arabic language as the medium of instruction. In table 1, when asked the question about the language they preferred to be used in the classroom, 73% of the students preferred Arabic, while 68% of the teachers had a preference for the Arabic language as a medium of instruction. 68% of the teachers reported that they would not hesitate to switch between L1 and L2 while teaching English in the classroom. They attribute

switching between the two languages to their understanding of the classroom environment and accelerating the students' learning process.

Table 1 Attitude towards using Arabic during English classes

Item	Yes	No			
Do you prefer the Arabic language to be used in the classroom? (Students)	73%	27%			
Do you prefer the Arabic language to be used in the classroom? (Teachers)	68%	32%			
Item	SA	A	NAND	D	SD
1. I prefer my teacher to give exam instructions in Arabic	69%	13%	3%	8%	7%
2. I prefer my teacher to use Arabic with grammar lessons	55%	18%	7%	15%	5%
3. I prefer my teacher translate new vocabulary for me	53%	15%	11%	13%	8%
4. I feel uncomfortable when my teacher talk to me in English	49%	17%	7%	8%	19%
5. I fail to understand the teacher instructions in English	46%	19%	8%	16%	11%
6. I prefer to use Arabic when doing classroom exercises with my classmates.	39%	23%	10%	17%	11%

The students also had a preference for the teachers to use the Arabic language while teaching. Given that 73% of the students hugely favored their teachers who used the Arabic language showing a positive attitude toward the use of Arabic language in the class when compared to the English language. In the table above, 69% of the students preferred exam instructions in the Arabic language. As such, this could be correlated with the fact that L1 plays an integral role in reducing anxiety amongst the student, enhancing the learning environment, and preparing students psychologically to undertake the exam. Moreover, the study also revealed that 55% of the students giving their response favoring the use of Arabic language even with grammar lessons. The results reported from these questions are evidenced in the studies conducted by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), Franklin (1990), and Dickson (1996) where, in addition to students preferring lessons undertaken using the Arabic language, the teacher also favored this particular move. Nevertheless, Harbord (1992) acknowledges L1 as a central communications tool in a classroom but fails to recognize its use in outlining and giving an explanation of grammar. In another question asked, 53% of the students preferred their teachers first to translate a new vocabulary word into Arabic. The explanation could reveal the strategy embraced by students of learning new words through translation for easy understanding, as explained by Leonardi (2010). Subsequently, 49% of the students reported that they felt uncomfortable when talking to their teachers in English. This finding aligns with Prabhu (1987) who found a high likelihood of learners using the L1 when conversing with their teachers, against the use of L2. Willis and Willis (2007) emphasize that L2 cannot be taught effectively without the inclusion of L1 because of the fundamental benefits L1 brings to the classroom, particularly for the new entrants into the school.

In the above table, 46% of students interviewed indicated that they failed to understand the teachers' instructions in English. Similarly, Chavez (2002) points out that in most classroom settings students are known to use both L1 and L2. From the table also, 39% of the students admitted that they favored L1 for group work in classroom activities. These findings concur with the study where many learners preferred using L1 when discussing coursework with classmates and their teachers (Cameron: 2001).

Cook (2001) also endorses the use of L1 amongst learners not only when seeking for help around assignments but also when they are addressing other issues such as roles and

enhancing their overall understanding. Findings were also drawn from the qualitative data to qualify the quantitative numbers. The themes derived from the qualitative data reported that students had their preference of learning new vocabulary through the Arabic language. One of the responses from a student indicated that he could read and learn better when learning happens in Arabic. Furthermore, he could understand new words well when translated into the Arabic language. Another student reported that using the Arabic language to explain new words was effective avoiding the need for looking up the word in the dictionary. Thus, translation of English vocabulary into L1 facilitated their learning. In the study of teachers' thoughts, views, and attitudes regarding employing L1 in their teaching processes, the researcher found that they generally held a positive attitude toward the use of L1 in L2 class. One of the teachers remarked that he decided to alternate between L1 and L2 for to help students to understand and comprehend all that they were being taught. From these findings, both teachers' and students' preference of L1 suggests that the use of L1 may significantly improve L2 learning.

Reasons to Refer to L1 by Teachers

What situations that make teachers use Arabic in English lessons?

From the findings of the study, the researcher also aimed to understand other situations that teachers were forced, pushed, or motivated to use the Arabic language in English lessons. The findings revealed that the teachers' reasons differed completely from those given by students regarding the context where each party employed the use of L1. Teachers' interview reflected their responses to the various reasons for using L1 while teaching L2. Their responses are explained within the following thematic areas.

1. Using L1 as a Facilitator

The teachers explained their reliance on L1 because this facilitated secure communication with beginner students and those who could not comprehend L2 well. Moreover, they believed that students also presented their argument more succinctly and naturally in L1 than in L2. As such, the teachers used L1 in order to foster interactive learning amongst the students. From the study, it was noted that L1 offered teachers with excellent opportunity to give a comprehensive explanation of some key words and grammar to their students. For example, students who misunderstood some abstract words in L2 could depend on L1 for an explanation, and this would expose them to language analysis that subsequently expanded their learning process. From the findings, one of the teachers explained that the sole use of L2 was not enough for the students to learn new words and that the Arabic language helped students to learn new English words. Therefore, teachers benefitted a great deal from using L1 in facilitating the learning processes, where they were able to introduce their students to abstract concepts in L2 through the use of L1.

2. Time Efficiency

The participant teachers reported that the use of L1 allowed them to manage time effectively in teaching English. They felt that it was difficult to achieve the balance between following the pacing schedule and allowing students enough time to practice and learn lessons. Therefore, to save time, the use of the Arabic language proved to be useful as teachers could teach according to the syllabus as stipulated in their respective curricula. The teachers pointed out that preference of Arabic over English in such a situation was valid for explaining grammar and vocabulary. According to Turnbull (2001), teachers inevitably use L1 when in numerous positions; for example, the use of L1 is more efficient while translating new words for their learners and making teaching effective. The teachers thought that the use of Arabic in the classroom not only made the learning environment favorable but also made the learners

learn the new words more efficiently when compared to their exposure to the sole use of L2. Also, the use of L1 enabled teachers to save their time in scheduling the lessons efficiently. This deduction correlates with findings reported from the studies carried out by Al-Abdan (1993) and Al-Nofaie (2010), where teachers had a preference of teaching their students through the use of the mother tongue.

3. Raising Motivation

The findings from this study established that two teachers employed the use of Arabic language as a motivating factor for the low-achieving students to gain proficiency. From the interviews, the teachers elucidated that students needed instructional teaching through the use of the Arabic language whereby they could easily understand new words. These findings of motivating students as they are introduced to new words are also echoed through results and findings reported by Franklin (1990) and Dickson (1996). They reported that using L1 for low-achieving students proved essential and impelled teachers to make an extensive use of the mother tongue for teaching. Furthermore, one of the teachers explained that he used L1 as an instrument that would motivate the students in his lessons. Through the motivation, the teacher added that students were encouraged to read and write to a considerable extent. Additionally, he pointed out that the students were not able to complete their assignments in L2, but would strive to undertake them when the Arabic language was used. This finding concurs with Lin (2000), who reported that teachers were likely to use L1 to draw the attention and capture the interest of the learners. This study also revealed that in addition to motivation, the students' proficiency also determined the amount of L1 use as an additional medium in teaching L2. In this regard, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), Franklin (1990), and Dickson (1996) assert that teachers resort to the use of the L1 because of the low ability manifested by learners. However, Crawford (2004) differs with these sentiments and state that besides the proficiency of learners, teacher's experience also impacts their decision of resorting to the use of L1. Moreover, the embrace of L1 to foster positive relationships with students and facilitate teaching instructions were also other reasons identified for such cases (Franklin, 1990).

On the other hand, the students identified different reasons for resorting to L1. In a question eliciting information from the students about the frequency of L1 in learning English. Low achieving students frequently employed L1 when challenging situations arose during English classes. Other students, however, inclined towards L2 and stated that they rarely used the L1 in their explanations. From this finding, it is easy to deduce that low-achieving students were more likely to use the L1 than high-level and advanced students. In their response, low achievers invariably used L1 while the advanced and proficient students stated that they used L1 with a purpose of completing class activities. Correspondingly, Stapa and Majid (2006) attribute that L1 enables low beginners, particularly those who have L2 as the second language, get accustomed to the proficient use of English.

4. Giving instructions

From the findings, giving instructions in L1 or L2 elicited mixed reactions from the teachers interviewed. On the one hand, one of the teachers responded that when homework instructions were given to students through L2 only, most students would find many reasons for not undertaking the exercise. However, when a similar assignment was given in L1, they did not find any reasons for not accomplishing it. Thus, they ended up doing the task satisfactorily. On the other hand, another teacher had a different method to handle this situation. He stated that he would give instructions in the target language first and then subsequently ask the students to repeat the instructions in their mother tongue. These views

are shared by Atkinson (1987), who argues that when teachers are giving out instructions, students are asked not only to repeat them in their mother tongue but also identify keywords and phrases used in the instructions. Moreover, the teachers believed that L1 still played a critical role in enhancing the teaching and learning process amongst the low achievers. The findings of the study identified some of the circumstances that may lead teachers to use the mother tongue in their teaching processes. They mainly include explaining new vocabulary, grammatical concepts and giving exam instructions for the justification of employing the use of L1.

CONCLUSIONS

Although optimum use of English is ideal for providing exposure to target language and accelerate learning, this study revealed that Arabic language was widely used in teaching English in the Saudi context for the purposes of facilitating L2 learning processes, motivating L2 learners, efficient use of time, understanding of new vocabulary and participating in class activities with their peers and teachers. Whereas the teachers understood the underlying disadvantages of the use of the Arabic language, they still used it to cater for the needs of the students and to motivate them. However, most of the teachers believed that the use of Arabic should be kept at minimum to enhance comprehension of the English language. The teachers asserted that the use of L1 was productive especially when it would enable beginners and low-achieving students to understand the English language. Both students and teachers agreed that they used and preferred employing L1 over L2 because of the differences in the types and levels the language learners. From the study, it was further revealed that teachers would, on many occasions, use the Arabic language, such as explaining new grammatical concepts and vocabularies. Likewise, the students also revealed that they felt comfortable when using the Arabic language. They believed that the L1 played a crucial role to achieve certain goals, where the L2 could failed. Finally, comparative studies about high and low achievers of English and examine the frequency of L1 and its impact on their learning processes.

It is recommended that further studies should be undertaken to give a clear understanding regarding the use of L1 amongst teachers and students not only in the Saudi Arabian context but also other contexts worldwide. An example of such a study should be carried out where two classrooms are compared depending on the proficiency of the learners. The comparison analysis should further explain differences of outcomes between the classes where Arabic is used to teach English and the classes where Arabic is restricted to teach the targeted language. Moreover, an exit interview could be adopted for this scenario to test the skills of the students in both L1 and L2 classrooms, and to ascertain the underlying similarities and differences in their perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes. This kind of study could demonstrate the correlation between the L1 and the increase in learner's proficiency level. The findings of this study can set the stage for future research to explore the correlation between the uses of L1 as a motivational instrument and the learning attainment. Future research projects may also inform understandings about teachers' specific needs where they would resort to L1 in their respective English classrooms.

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