

“WHAT IS THE ROLE OF L1 IN L2 CLASSROOMS?”

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the long-established orthodoxy of avoiding all use of L1 in L2 contexts, a paradigm shift in the perception of L2 teaching and learning has recently been observed. Accordingly, a vast number of researchers put a spotlight on employing L1 as a teaching and mediating tool in EFL settings and whether this would underlie positive or negative implications on the second language teaching and learning. In view of the fact that the KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority 2014) in Dubai accentuates student learning, it is believed that the teacher's role, as an informed decision maker, is to determine the most suitable route to get to the desired end result with the intention of buttressing and elevating student learning. What teachers believe is seen as the indiscernible cognitive dimension that formulates the philosophy about their teaching practices; hence, this study is conducted to tap into the bilingual EFL teachers' perception of code-switching as a constructive instrument in their classrooms and whether utilizing L1 serves any pedagogical functions. Given that this study is piloted in the UAE, the shared L1 is Arabic and the L2 is English.

Key words: code-switching, Arabic language, English language, classroom context, teachers' perception.

Introduction:

Since the extensive criticism and discredit of the Grammar-Translation Method followed by the emergence of the Direct Method and through the evolution of the Communicative Language Teaching approach, the 'English Only' paradigm has dominated EFL classrooms (Cummins 2008); Cook (2001) points out that ideal classrooms are usually depicted as having minimal or no use of L1 which is considered a noncommittal procedure to be resorted to in emergencies only. Cook (2008) states that almost all popular teaching methods promote the concept of "the less the first language is used in the classroom, the better the teaching" (p. 180). Cummins (2008) explains that instruction in foreign and second language teaching should be exclusively executed in the target language with no recourse to the learners' first language and that the two languages are to be kept strictly separate. In the same vein, Language Compartmentalism, developing L2 with no reference to L1, is believed by many theorists to be the perfect way to avoid L1 negative interference (Cook 2001).

On the other hand, proponents of L1 use in L2 settings aver that L1 has consistently been acknowledged as a resourceful tool in supporting second language teaching and learning; Cook (2001) asserts that "it is time to open the door that has been firmly shut in language teaching" and to inaugurate the systematic use of L1 (p. 403). Swain and Lapkin (2000) argue that insisting on not using L1 in attempting linguistically and cognitively complex tasks means intentionally disregarding a pivotal cognitive tool. As Crawford (2004) puts it, "dogmatic exclusion" of L1 leads to building up affective factors that hampers L2 acquisition (p.7). Similarly, Levine (2014) confirms that L1 is so pedagogically and socially functional that it should be guaranteed a natural place in the L2 setting. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), McMillan and Rivers (2011), and Bhooth, Azman and Ismail (2014), in their studies, expound a powerful argument saying that implementing L1 in L2 teaching plays a facilitating role that allows learners to work at higher cognitive levels.

Research Methodology:

To provide a thorough understanding of the research problem, the current study follows a convergent parallel mixed methods design in which "a researcher collects both qualitative and quantitative data,

analyzes them separately, and then compares the results to see if the findings confirm or disconfirm each other” (Creswell 2014, p. 219).

Participants:

The selected accessible population (Best & Kahn 2006) consists of 25 full-time, bilingual EFL teachers whose mother tongue is Arabic. All participants have degrees in English-related majors (TESOL or TEFL).

	Percent
1. Gender	
• Male	56%
• Female	44%
2. Education	
• Diploma	0%
• Graduate	68%
• Postgraduate	32%
3. Teaching Experience	
• Less than 5 years	24%
• 5-10 years	28%
• 10+ years	48%
4. Employing Organization	
• Private	88%
• Government	12%
5. Position	
• Junior	20%
• Senior	56%
• Coordinator/HOD	24%

Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Instruments:

The quantitative tool selected for this study is a questionnaire adapted from the work of Mohebbi and Alavi (2013); both attitudinal and behavioral questions are included in order to find out what people think and do. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to provide reliable and comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree 2006).

Procedure:

Cross-sectional data is accumulated from the respondents in a short time. The participants are first asked to fill out a questionnaire; the 25 statements of the questionnaire are based on a three-point Likert scale. Interviews with 5 teachers are administered shortly after the questionnaire; further elaboration on the teachers' attitude and functions of L1 use are achieved through 15 open-ended questions in each interview that lasts between 20-30 minutes.

Research Questions:

As Cook (2008) states “[c]ode-switching is found wherever bilingual speakers talk to each other” (p.175); in the light of this notion, the research questions are believed to be:

1. What are the EFL teachers' attitudes toward using L1 in the L2 classrooms?
2. What functions do the EFL teachers think are served by the use of L1?

Data Analysis and Findings:

1. To probe into teachers' perceptions of using L1 in EFL classrooms and the attained pedagogical functions, the data obtained through the questionnaire is coded and analyzed using Excel sheets.
2. Teachers' Attitude:
3. The second section of the questionnaire is intended to explore the respondents' stance of employing Arabic in the EFL classroom as a part of their teaching methodology; the following table displays how the 25 participants respond:

Attitude	Agree	Disagree	Not Decided
1. I often use Arabic in the EFL classroom	12%	64%	24%
2. I'm conscious of my code-switching?	72%	16%	12%
3. I think L1 use is an efficient strategy in English language teaching and learning	56%	32%	12%
4. I think code switching to Arabic positively influences the EFL learning process	56%	32%	12%
5. I think institutional policy should allow L1 use in EFL classrooms	40%	20%	40%

Table 2. Teachers' attitude toward using L1 in L2 settings

The table shows that 64% of the respondents do not actually resort to Arabic in English language teaching; surprisingly, 56% of the participants regard using L1 as an efficient teaching strategy that could have a positive influence on the students' L2 learning.

72% confirm that code-switching for them is never a spontaneous alternative. In addition, 40% admit that institutional policies that prohibit using L1 in L2 classrooms should allow taking advantage of so enriching a tool.

Question	0-10%	10+%	30+%	50+%
1. The percent of time I actually use Arabic in the classroom	88%	12%	---	---
2. The percent of time I think Arabic should be used in the classroom	44%	44%	12%	---
3. The percent of time my students use Arabic in the classroom	20%	44%	32%	4%

Table 3.

Table 3 illustrates the proportion of EFL class time spent using L1. 88% of the participants claim not exceeding 10% if not less, while only 12% choose 10+%; 44% think Arabic should occupy 0-10% of the class time, 44% suggest a percent of 10+%, whereas 12% think 30+% would be more convenient. 20% of the EFL teachers say their students tend to use Arabic 0-10%, 44% believe their students speak Arabic 10+% of the class time, 32% admit their students are inclined to rely on Arabic 30+%, whilst the least number (4%) state that students spend about half of the class conversing in Arabic.

The interviewees mostly hold positive attitudes toward using Arabic within EFL classrooms; teacher A., senior teacher, says that he reverts to Arabic quite often in teaching English language and believes it enhances the students' L2 learning ability. A very important remark that teacher A. makes is that he never uses Arabic when administrative visitors are around because "they think a professional English teacher shouldn't utter a single Arabic word in class". Teacher M. asserts that she reverts to Arabic upon need; she adds that not only does she feel reluctant but also guilty when she resorts to Arabic. In like manner, teacher R. justifies his frequent code-switching as being a rich cognitive tool that needs to be well used. However, teacher AR., head of English department, clarifies his stance saying that although there is no explicit rule that prohibits using Arabic in EFL teaching, it still goes without saying, Teacher D. seems firm in discrediting Arabic as a mediating tool; she contends that she even bans her students from using it at any stage of the lesson.

Functions of Using L1 in L2 Context:

The third section of the questionnaire proposed a range of 12 different functions that L1 can serve in the L2 setting; the following table demonstrates the participants' preferences:

Function	Agree	Disagree	Not Decided
1. I use learners' L1 to provide clarification when they do not understand in L2	48%	40%	12%
2. I use learners' L1 to teach new vocabulary and/or explain grammar	44%	52%	4%
3. I use learners' L1 to provide feedback on their errors	16%	64%	20%
4. I use learners' L1 to give metalinguistic knowledge and/or discuss tasks and assignments	28%	60%	12%
5. I use learners' L1 in administering exams and quizzes	8%	80%	12%
6. I use learners' L1 to deal with in-class discipline problems	44%	44%	12%
7. I use learners' L1 to answer possible questions at the end of the class	28%	64%	8%
8. I use learners' L1 to build rapport and/or make humorous comments	52%	36%	12%
9. I use learners' L1 to give individual help to learners	52%	36%	12%
10. I use learners' L1 to save time in lengthy task explanations	12%	50%	32%
11. I use learners' L1 to draw analogies between L1 and L2	60%	20%	20%
12. I use learners' L1 to give personal comments	16%	56%	28%
13. Others			

Table 4. Functions of L1 in L2 settings

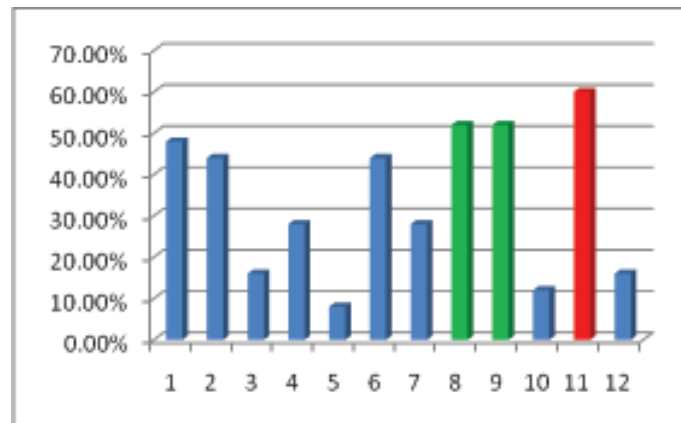


Chart 1.

Drawing analogies, as shown on the chart, between L1 and L2 seems to be the main purpose (60%) why the participants employ Arabic in EFL contexts; building rapport as well as offering individual help to students come as the second mostly approved functions (52%). 48% implement Arabic in providing clarifications, whilst 44% make use of Arabic as a part of their teaching methodology. The least accepted purpose for which Arabic can be seen as usefully integrated in L2 teaching is administering exams and quizzes (8%).

Teacher AR., in the interview, states that he never uses Arabic in his EFL classrooms except for making cross-linguistic connections and holding comparisons between L1 and L2, the activity that proved to be extremely productive and contributed to the class dynamics. Teacher M. mentions an array of reasons behind employing Arabic in her EFL classroom, e.g. making cultural references, translating new vocabulary, clarifying philosophical ideas and idiomatic expressions, referring to Arabic equivalent rhetorical devices, and drawing upon cross-curricular links between L1 and L2. Teacher A. also lists some functions that he considers purposeful in L2 teaching, e.g. establishing rapport especially with low proficiency level students, explaining

grammar concepts, introducing academic writing at early stages, presenting abstract or complicated words. Teacher R., Egyptian, confirms that he sometimes resorts to the Emirati dialect to get a message across to his Emirati students which raises a question: If communication dictates code-switching between dialects, so why not approve it between languages? Teacher D. claims that if she ever uses code-switching, that would be in favor of saving time, and helping low achievers keep track of the lesson.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The findings drawn from both the qualitative and the quantitative data confirm each other to a great extent, which adds to the reliability and credibility of the information embodied in this study that attempts to accomplish a better understanding of the efficacy of L1 in L2 settings.

Evidence from data analysis shows a gap between theory and practice. The EFL teachers largely believe in the importance of exploiting L1 as an already existing language system at their disposal, the opinion that is supported by Cook (2008) “[t]he profile of the proficient L2 user includes the code-switching mode of language” (p.177); conversely, they show a great deal of reluctance towards the practical integration of L1 in their teaching practices. This reluctant attitude could be attributed to the institutional policies and the fact that English-only stance is mainly advocated by policy makers (Mohebbi & Alavi 2013); similarly, teachers’ unwillingness to use L1 has to do with self-esteem and self-image.

Delving into the pedagogical functions of employing L1 in EFL contexts, drawing analogies and highlighting cross-linguistic connections, from which both languages benefit (Butzkamm 2003), come in line with the findings of Horst, White & Montreal (2010); building rapport and social relationships, scaffolding slow achievers, explaining grammar, saving time, and maintaining discipline are some findings that are in accordance with those of Cook (2001), Littlewood and Yu (2011), and Afzal (2013). Equally important, translation is said to be among the most valuable L2 teaching methods as for its feasibility, the result that is found in this study and many others, e.g. Nation (2003), Cummins (2008), and Forman (2012). The only sanctioned, culture-specific role of L1 in L2 teaching is the cross-curricular activity in which teachers and students take pride in making cultural and religious connections and hold onto their Arabic identities.

The disparity in the teachers’ attitude toward employing L1, the fact that they appreciate it as an invaluable tool but too reluctant to actually put it into effect, calls for profound understanding of the substantial reasons behind such an equivocal stand. Generally speaking, what is disputed by Mohebbi and Alavi (2014) that the L2-only stance is usually supported by policy makers and that the predominant policy in many contexts is to maximize TL use (Inbar-Lourie 2010) has been confirmed by the results of the current study.

To point out, the results of this study have to be interpreted with regard to its limitations in terms of the sample size, number of questionnaire questions, and diversity of instruments. Future studies need to take into consideration variables such as teachers’ educational backgrounds, experience, and idiosyncrasies to provide a more extensive understanding of the issue under scrutiny.

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