

## **An Investigation of English Teachers' and Students' Perceptions 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 on 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

### **1. Introduction**

The embrace and 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. Despite the uproar resonating in the air against the use of the first language remains a mystery given that 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 are able to 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.

### **2. Literature Review**

In the process of learning a new language, it greatly 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. Research studies conducted 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 language, they are able to enhance learning. Given the interest, they manifest with the learning process with time.

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 reigning 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' resentment of the use of 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.

### **2.1. Proponents of L1**

It is vital to note the various reasons heightening 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 on how second language acquisition (SLA) should be correlated with the L1 acquisition. Cook (2001) acknowledges that there is a staggering difference between the first-language and second-language acquisition gave that learners' in the second category favorable placement to master the language learning process. Accordingly, there are various ways a learner could learn the second language, also with the use of the first language in the process (Madriñan, 2014; Silverberg & Samuel, 2004). Macaro (2001) opines that it is beyond reasonable doubt that the exclusion of L1 in an L2 context because learners usually look for support from L1 in order to enhance their understanding of the learning process. Harbord (1992) shares similar sentiments by asserting in the context where ELT teachers have used only the English language has attracted dislike and multiple misunderstandings amongst the learners. On one hand, these failures indicate that the L1 plays a key role in the classroom because learners are able to cope with the second language through enhanced language analysis, explanation, and confirming that the grammar meets the required standards, as Aurbuch 1998 (cited in Sharma, 2006) notes on its subsequent advantages. 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 given that the favorable learning environment is free for open communication processes. Studies conducted indicate that the use of L2 only may negatively impact chances of students explaining themselves concisely and the understanding of the learning process diminishes (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 in 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 are able to encounter meaningful intake.

### **2.2. Opponents of L1 use**

Despite the acquired consensus in the studies above, many researchers have discussed the use of L1 in foreign English 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 in the teaching process. There is recognition for the L2 gaining momentum and enabling learners to acquire the needed skills and knowledge for grasping the needed L2 grammar and vocabulary (Caroll, 1975; Krashen This study was conducted on, 1982).

Many authors have come to give their support to the exclusion of L1 in the learning because learners are given the full exposure to the target language, which is key to enhancing the language acquisition process (Duff & Polio, 1994, 1990; Chambers, 1991; Atkinson, 1987). The concept stipulating that L2 provides the platform and take-off base in its acquisition process remains relevant, given that L1 does not in any way ascertain its importance.

Thus the need to exclude it in the main stream teaching and learning in the respective foreign classroom settings. The argument posed by the exclusive use of L1 in a classroom context indicates fear of its dominance and this might appear to suggest that because it is not the real language then L2 is brought to the limelight. In another context, MacDonald (1993) argues that L2 should be used entirely 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 a foreign classroom contradicts what is learned and that students sometimes lose focus in the learning process when L1 is used interchangeably with L2, changing the language process (MacDonald, 1993; Chambers, 1991).

In a study conducted by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), the findings reported that it was not appropriate to employ the use of L1 because this would certainly ruin the essence of foreign-language teaching. MacDonald (1993) indicated that the switch between L1 and L2 limits students from pushing toward digging deep into the language, an aspect that undermines the learning process. 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 in the course of 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 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 main medium of instruction as directed by the University.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. 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 attended to the same class that was populated with forty students. 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.

#### **3.2. Data collection**

Data collection for this study was done through questionnaires and interviews where the teachers and students were interviewed. Questionnaire interviews were undertaken with students being administered with questionnaires for self-completion that aimed to capture their views, opinions, and thoughts regarding the language they preferred to be used in the classroom. It is vital that the questionnaire was formulated using the Arabic language to eliminate any threats around questionnaire handling and subsequent response to the questions. 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 attitude toward the use of L1 as a medium of instruction in the class. The instrument consisted of semi-structured questions that stimulated students to expound more on their reasons and answers given to the questions.

#### **3.3. Data analysis**

Data collected was categorized, cleaned, and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were run and 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.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

##### 4.1. 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 a majority of respondents consisting of teachers and students preferred the use of the Arabic language as the main medium of instruction. In table 1, when asked the question on the language they preferred to be used in the classroom, a staggering 73% of the students preferred Arabic, while 68% of the teachers had a preference for the Arabic language as a medium of instruction. Amongst the 68% of the teachers, they reported that they would not hesitate to switch between L1 while teaching in the classroom. The high percentage of the teachers attributes their understanding of the classroom environment and needs of the students for the 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 preferred their teachers to use the Arabic language to teach indicates a positive attitude toward the Arabic language use in the class when compared to the English language. In the table above, 69% of the students preferred their teachers give exam instruction using the Arabic language. As such, this could be correlated with the fact that L1 plays an integral role in reducing anxiety amongst the student and enhancing the learning environment and preparing students psychologically to undertake the exam. Moreover, another milestone was attributed with 55% of the students giving their response favoring the use of Arabic language with grammar lessons. The results reported from these questions are evidenced in 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 that central communications tool in a classroom but fails to recognize its use in outlining and giving an explanation on grammar. In another question asked, 53% of the students preferred their teachers first translate a new vocabulary word into Arabic. The explanation could reveal the strategy embraced by students of learning new words through a translation for easy understanding, as explained by Leonardi (2010). Subsequently, 49% of the students voiced their concerns that they felt uncomfortable when talking to their teachers in English. Nevertheless, this finding is not different from what Prabhu (1987) elucidates in his study: there was 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 flourish in such a learning environment without the inclusion of L1 because of the fundamental benefits it brings to the classroom, particularly the new entrants into the school.

In the table, 46% of students interviewed indicated that they failed to understand the teachers' instructions in English. From the results, we can conclude the relevance of L1, given that it connects students and teachers, as elaborated in the thoughts directed by Harbord (1992), where L1 is used in giving instructions in class frequently. Similarly, Chavez (2002) points out that in most classroom settings students are known to use both L1 and L2, with the exception that this not entirely an absolute background where L2 is given preference. From the table also, 39% of the students admitted that they preferred to use L1 for group work in classroom activities. These findings are backed by the study undertaken by Cameron (2001) that reported many learners giving L1 preference when discussing homework with classmates and their teachers. 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 was undertaken through Arabic. Furthermore, he could understand new words raised by a teacher when the explanation was done using the Arabic language. Another student raised the issue that using the Arabic language to explain new words was effective, given that there was a need for looking up the word in the dictionary. Concisely, this proved to be the easy way of learning. The teachers also gave their thoughts, views, and attitudes regarding the issue of employing L1 in their teaching processes.

One of the teachers remarked that he prefers to alternate between L1 and L2 for the students to understand and comprehend all that they are being taught. From these findings, it is inevitable that the significance manifested by the use of L1 in the classroom by both teachers and students.

#### **4.2. 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 in regard to the context where each party employed the use of L1. Information from the interview with the teachers relative to this question was answered as the teachers responded and expounded on the various reasons raised by students. As such, the teachers raised their explanations and preferences citing why they used L1 alternatively with L2 while teaching. Their responses are explained within the following thematic areas;

##### **4.2.1. Using L1 as a Facilitator**

The teachers explained their reliance on L1 because this facilitated easy communication with beginner students and those who could not comprehend L2 well. Moreover, students also presented their argument regarding the vitality created by L1 given that L2 could sometimes hinder them from understanding their teachers. As such, the teachers used L1 in order to foster interactive learning amongst the students. From the study, it was noted that L1 gave teachers an opportunity to give a comprehensive explanation of some crucial words and grammar that posed difficulty to the learners. For example, students who did not understand 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, a teacher gave an explanation implicating that the sole use of L2 was not enough for the students to learn such new words and that the Arabic language made it easy for the students to maneuver through the 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 of the L2 through the use of L1.

##### **4.2.2. Time Efficiency**

Another benefit was manifested through the aspect of time management. Teaching English as a foreign language in, for example, Saudi Arabia, many teachers seemingly lagged behind in their time-plans because of time issues. Therefore, in order to save time, the use of the Arabic language proved effective as they could teach with the required speed to complete the syllabus as stipulated in their respective curricula. The teachers pointed out that preference of Arabic over English in such a situation was effective as a time for explaining grammar and vocabulary, using the latter was saved for when the former was adopted in the classroom. According to Turnbull (2001), teachers inevitably used L1 when in numerous positions; for example, when translating new words for the learners, the use of L1 was efficient given that students would be able to understand L2's unfamiliar words. Alternatively, Meyer (2008) attributes that in the context the teacher restricts the use of L1 in explaining new vocabulary and grammar. The learning environment was engulfed with stress as anxiety amongst the students was likely to increase. However, the use of Arabic in the classroom not only made the learning environment favorably but also made the learners learn the new words more easily when compared to their exposure to the sole use of L2. Therefore, the use of L1 enabled teachers to save their time in scheduling the lessons effectively. 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 language.

### 4.2.3. 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. This was achieved as the students participated in the class activities actively. From the interviews, the teachers elucidated that students needed instructional teaching through the use of the Arabic language, where 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); where they reported using L1 for low-achieving students proved essential and pushed teachers to heavy usage of the mother tongue language for teaching. The study also revealed that in addition to motivation, the students' proficiency also played a role in the teachers' dependency on the usage of L1 for teaching. As such, the teachers admitted that learners' proficiency in L2 directed them to use L1 as an additional medium of teaching. 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 attributes that besides the proficiency of learners, teacher's experience also impacts their decision of resorting to the use of L1. Moreover, the embrace and use of L1 to foster positive relationships with students and facilitate teaching instructions were also other reasons identified for such cases (Franklin, 1990).

For the part of the students, they also gave their explanation on the varying reasons why they resorted to using L1. Accordingly, evidenced from the study, students stipulated that they frequently used L1 specifically when they are in difficult situations. Other students inclined and stated that they rarely used the first language 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. These results were manifested in the study when the students were subjected to the question where they were asked how often they used L1 in the class context. In their response, low beginners voiced their concerns that they inevitably use L1 while the high beginners indicated that they sometimes used L1. Subsequently, advanced and proficient students stated that they solemnly used L1 with a purpose of completing class activities. In an example, one teacher interviewed in the study 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 very large extent. Additionally, he pointed out that the students were not able to complete their assignments in any other language but would strive to undertake them when the Arabic language was used. Therefore, this can be identified as a grueling task for the low beginners. In a study conducted by Lin (2000), the findings reported that teachers were likely to use L1 in order to draw the attention and capture the interest of the learners. 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.

### 4.2.4. Giving instructions

From the findings, giving instructions elicited mixed reactions from the teachers interviewed. On one hand, a teacher elucidated that when instructions are given to students regarding a homework passed through L2 only, most students would find many reasons for not undertaking the exercise. However, when a similar assignment is given and an explanation done in their mother tongue, they had no reason as to why they would not undertake it; thus, they ended up doing the task satisfactorily. On the other hand, a second teacher had a different view regarding this question. He stipulated that he would give instructions in the target language and then subsequently ask the students to repeat back the instructions in their mother tongue. These views are shared by Atkinson (1987), who gives his understanding that when teachers are giving out instructions, students are asked not only repeat them in their mother tongue but also identify keywords and phrases used in the assignment. The findings from this study gave the impact of the employing the use of L1 and the teachers identified dependency from the students as a drawback of the continuous use of the Arabic language in the classroom to teach. Moreover, the teachers gave their suggestions that L1 still played a critical role in enhancing the teaching and learning process amongst the low beginners of the English language. The findings of the study identify all the scenarios and causes that can trigger teachers to use the mother tongue in their teaching processes. As such, explaining new vocabulary and grammar and giving exam instructions were identified as the core reasons given for employing the use of L1. It is recommended that further studies be undertaken to give a clear understanding regarding the embrace and use of L1 amongst teachers and students not only in the Saudi Arabian context but also other meaningful 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 detail the use of Arabic in one classroom only with the other one restricted to only the targeted language. Moreover, an exit interview could be adopted for this scenario to test the skills of the students in both classrooms. Analysis is done to ascertain the underlying similarities and differences in the students' perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes. An example of this study should pose as an eye opener to testing the correlation between the Arabic language and the increase in learner's proficiency level.

### **5. Conclusion**

Conclusively, from the results and findings of the study, it is imperative to substantiate that the Arabic language was widely used and its use was inevitable. Whereas the teachers understood the underlying disadvantages of the use of the Arabic language, they still used the language, given the needs of the students. Otherwise, most of them shared similar views that the Arabic language did not play a role in the enhancing students to learn and comprehend the English language effectively. As such, teachers had a preference for the language because they were sure that this move would enable beginners and low-achieving students to understand the English language. Both students and teachers agreed that the use and preference of L1 over English because of individual abilities. In this regard, teachers employ a medium of instruction so that students' interests and needs to the target language are catered to effectively. From the study, it was further revealed that teachers would, on many occasions, employ the use of the Arabic language, such as explaining new grammatical and vocabulary words. For the case of students, they voiced their concerns that they would prefer the use of Arabic as they continued to interact with the English language. In addition to receiving exam instructions, the students reported that they mainly used the Arabic language to learn new words, translating vocabulary terms, and participating in class activities with their peers. The students also revealed the comfortability that came with the use of the Arabic language, and the subsequent feeling they have in a classroom context. They believed that the L1 played a crucial role in certain purposes, where the L2 could fail. These findings are echoed by ideas posed by Atkinson (1987), Harbord (1992), Nation (2003), and Scott and de la Fuente (2008), who assert that resorting to L1 was in line with that occasion where L2 could play that learning or interaction process. Given these findings, there is a need for further studies to research more on the context of high and low achievers of English and examine the frequency of how the Arabic language impacts their learning processes. Moreover, further research needs to be undertaken to ascertain various ways the Arabic language can be harnessed so that students can improve their proficiency manifested through reading, listening, and undertaking assignments using the English language. The findings of this study can help elicit future research that helps explore the existing correlation between the uses of the Arabic language as a motivational instrument for promoting learning amongst the learners. Future research should encourage and elicit more understandings to teachers regarding the specific scenarios where they would use L1 in their respective English classrooms.

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