

The Effects of the Use of First Language on Learning English as a Second Language: Attitudes of Arabic EFL Learners

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Abstract

Teachers may wonder whether the use of first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom is beneficial or detrimental to L2 learning. The present study investigates the attitudes of L1 Arabic speakers towards the use of English in the L2 classroom. The study examined the following: a) whether Arabic is used in English language classrooms; b) students' attitudes towards their English teachers' use of Arabic; c) students' attitudes towards their classmates' use of Arabic; d) whether the use of Arabic facilitates L2 English learning. The study was conducted with 149 male Saudi university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners studying in a Saudi English department. They were asked to complete two questionnaires: a) a background questionnaire; and b) an attitudinal questionnaire. The findings revealed that the participants believed that: a) Arabic is seldom used by their teachers; b) the use of English is more beneficial than Arabic to learning English; and c) Arabic can be used in some situations by teachers when communicating important information.

Keywords: Arab EFL learners, attitudes, English classroom, learning, using Arabic, second language

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Introduction

Teachers' strategies and practices in the classroom influence the success in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Çelik & Aydın, 2018). What teachers implement in the classroom has been the focus of education researchers in terms of enhancing the classroom environment. Researchers and language teachers have long debated the issues surrounding the use of students' L1 in L2 (Adnan, Mohamad, Yusoff, & Ghazali, 2014; Sadighi, Rahimpour, & Rezaei, 2018). A watershed moment in the teaching of English came when the grammar-translation method was abandoned in the late 19th century, a method promoting the use of L1 in the L2 classroom (Almohaimed & Almurshed, 2018). In other words, using students' L1 in the L2 classroom was considered a hindrance in the L2 classroom (Hall & Cook, 2014). Cook (2001) maintains that since L2 learners acquire their L1 without the help of any other languages, they do not need to use their L1 to help them acquire their L2. Nonetheless, he proposes that teachers may use L1 for class management and explaining difficult grammar; this view is supported by Cole (1998), who also suggests that L1 should only be used with students who have low levels of proficiency. Conversely, Krashen (1983), among others, makes the assumption that L1 would influence the plethora of L2 input necessary for the acquisition of L2. There is a dearth of research addressing the perspectives of students regarding their use of L1 (AlSharaeai, 2012) and the use of Arabic in the EFL classroom (Al-Balawi, 2016). The current study aims to examine the perspectives of Arab students as they pertain to their teachers' use of Arabic in the EFL classroom. Moreover, it examines the potential influence of Arabic on the success of students learning English.

Literature Review

Numerous researchers have focused on the success of L2 acquisition during adulthood (Al-Balawi, 2016). Researchers differ in their views regarding whether full acquisition is possible during adulthood (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996; Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 2011) or not (e.g., Bley-Vroman, 1990). Regardless of their position, all researchers appreciate the value of L2 input for the success of L2 acquisition. This is why teachers wonder whether their use of students' L1 may hinder their learning success.

Before discussing relevant studies, the following question must be considered: do teachers use their students' L1? A study was conducted by De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) with two language teachers who were teaching EFL at a German university. They were observed for 12 weeks and the findings revealed the occasional use of German to illustrate difficult English words and for other reasons that they believed would facilitate students' learning. Hall and Cook (2014) conducted a study with 2,785 teachers from 111 countries (including Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). All the teachers completed a questionnaire and 20 teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed the wide use of students' L1 and that the teachers used students' L1 for those who had low levels of proficiency or to communicate important information; these findings support earlier research (e.g., Cole, 1998; Cook, 2001). Hall and Cook's (2014) international study indicates that teachers (regardless of their nationality) tend to use students' L1. The question is whether students advocate the use of their L1. Zhao and Macaro (2014) propose that researchers' positions regarding the use of L1 in the L2 classroom fall into one of three categories: a) L1 should not be used; b) L2 use should be maximised; and c) equal amounts of L1 and L2 can be used. Studies that are for and against the use of L1 are reviewed below.

Tang (2002) conducted a study with 100 students and 20 teachers in China to examine whether the use of Chinese would have an adverse effect on EFL learning. A mixture of interviews, classroom observations and a questionnaire was utilised. The findings indicated that students and teachers generally favoured the use of Chinese. With regard to the Saudi context, Al-Nofaie (2010) investigated students' and teachers' perspectives concerning using Arabic in a Saudi EFL girls' intermediate school. The study was conducted with 30 students and three teachers. Data were gathered using: a) classroom observation; b) a questionnaire; and c) interviews. The findings revealed that students and teachers had positive attitudes towards using Arabic in EFL learning. The study results were confirmed by Alshammari (2011), who conducted a study of 13 teachers and 95 students in a technical college in Saudi Arabia. He administered a questionnaire and found participants had positive attitudes towards the use of Arabic when teaching English.

Conversely, several researchers have found that their participants opposed the use of L1 in the L2 classroom (e.g., Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nazary, 2008; Sharma, 2006). Nazary (2008) conducted a study with 85 L1 Farsi speakers on an English extracurricular course in Iran. He administered a 16-item questionnaire and found that the participants did not favour their teachers using their L1. They state that success in the EFL classroom depends on an abundance of L2. Their views support two views in the literature on second language acquisition (SLA). The first was presented by Krashen (1983), whose comprehensible input hypothesis assumes that success in L2 acquisition relies solely on exposure to L2 input. The second is related to the position adopted by Bley-Vroman (1990), who suggests that child L1 acquisition is different from adult L2 acquisition, and that full L2 acquisition is not possible post-childhood. Apart from this, those who are against the use of L1 in the L2 classroom assume that students are motivated to learn their L2 through their L1. This may result in what is known as L1 transfer of grammatical features that the L2 does not accommodate (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996).

It can be observed from the studies conducted in Saudi Arabia that L2 learners prefer their teachers to use their L1. Do students' educational backgrounds affect their perspective when it comes to using L1 in the L2 classroom? Nazary's (2008) study indicates that their participants did not prefer the use of their L1 as they were taking an optional English course to improve their English. The aim of the present study is to address the following questions:

1. Is Arabic used in university-level English language classrooms in Saudi Arabia?
2. To what extent do Saudi students who specialise in English have positive attitudes towards the use of Arabic and English in the English classroom?
3. Do Saudi students assume that the use of Arabic facilitates learning English as a second language?

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted with 149 male participants (mean age 21.7 years; SD=1.2), all of whom were male Saudi EFL students in an English department in Saudi Arabia. The average age at which they started taking formal English classes was 11.1 years. The participants were chosen at random and the original number was 161. Nevertheless, participants were excluded from the study if they were bilingual or began learning English before the age of 7 years. Therefore, such participants

may have attitudes towards the use of Arabic that fall outside the scope of this study. This precaution was taken as the aim of the study is to examine students' perspectives on their teachers' use of L1 (Arabic) in the EFL classroom.

Instruments

A questionnaire is considered a reliable source of information (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2005). Following studies that investigated students' perceptions and attitudes (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2010; Alshammari, 2011; Hall & Cook, 2014; Tang, 2002), two questionnaires (written in English) were administered: a) a background questionnaire; and b) an attitudinal questionnaire. The background questionnaire comprised nine items that addressed basic information about the participants, such as their age and when they started their formal English learning, and whether they had ever lived in an English-speaking country. Moreover, the background questionnaire addressed whether Arabic is used in the English language classroom, as this would provide me with information regarding the use of Arabic where the participants were studying. Conversely, the attitudinal questionnaire comprised 17 statements that were distributed over three constructs: a) attitudes towards teachers' use of Arabic and English; b) attitudes towards students' use of Arabic and English; and c) attitudes towards the possible impact of using Arabic and English on L2 learning of English. The 17 statements were inspired by statements used by other researchers (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Alsuhaibani, 2015; Sbairhat, Al Duweiri, Hashem, & Kalalkeh, 2018). Five-point Likert scales (from *always* to *never*) for the background questionnaire, and (from *strongly disagree*, to *strongly agree*) for the attitudinal questionnaire, were adopted.

Procedure

Written consent was sought from all participants and assurances were given that all personal information would remain confidential throughout the process. The participants were told that they could withdraw at any time without providing any reasons. After handing out the questionnaires, the participants were informed that they could request clarification or translation of any words they did not understand. Most completed the questionnaires in approximately 15 minutes.

Results

Table 1. below illustrates the findings that emerged from the background questionnaire (statements 7, 8 and 9) regarding the frequency with which Arabic is used in the EFL classroom. Moreover, the results of the three constructs display: a) attitudes towards teachers' use of Arabic and English (statements 1–8); b) attitudes towards students' use of Arabic and English (statements 9–12); and c) attitudes towards the possible impact of using Arabic and English on the L2 learning of English (statements 13–17). The tables below display the responses as numbers (frequency) and percentage scores (the number of responses is divided by the total number of participants, which is 149).

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for frequency of using Arabic in the English language classroom*

Questionnaire item		Alwa ys	Ofte n	Sometim es	Rarel y	never
7. I speak Arabic in the English-language classroom.	Frequen cy	50	32	37	11	19
	Percenta ge	33.6 %	21.5 %	24.8%	7.4%	12.8 %

8. Arabic is spoken by my teacher in the English-language classroom.	Frequency	8	27	29	72	13
	Percentage	5.4%	18.1%	19.5%	48.3%	8.7%
9. Arabic is spoken by my classmates in the English-language classroom.	Frequency	49	54	26	11	9
	Percentage	32.9%	36.2%	17.4%	7.4%	6.0%

The responses to statements 8 and 9 demonstrate that the participants were divided with regard to how frequently they spoke Arabic; however, it appears that they preferred to speak Arabic, and those who seldom or never spoke Arabic were relatively few in number. Statement 8 responses revealed that around half of the participants (48.3%) maintained that their teachers seldom spoke Arabic.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for attitudes towards teachers' use of Arabic and English

Questionnaire item		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I prefer my teacher to speak English when explaining concepts that are challenging.	Frequency	6	7	28	70	38
	Percentage	4.0%	4.7%	18.8%	47.0%	25.5%
2. It is necessary for teachers to speak English when introducing new material.	Frequency	11	9	18	81	30
	Percentage	7.4%	6.0%	12.1%	54.4%	20.1%
3. It is necessary for teachers to speak English when conveying important information: for example, exam instructions.	Frequency	50	33	15	28	23
	Percentage	33.6%	22.1%	10.1%	18.8%	15.4%
4. I would prefer the teacher to always speak Arabic in the English-language classroom.	Frequency	88	32	11	7	11
	Percentage	59.1%	21.5%	7.4%	4.7%	7.4%
5. I do not like it when the teacher speaks Arabic.	Frequency	62	55	18	6	8
	Percentage	41.6%	36.9%	12.1%	4.0%	5.4%
6. When talking with my teacher, I am more comfortable speaking Arabic.	Frequency	42	37	22	38	10
	Percentage	28.2%	24.8%	14.8%	25.5%	6.7%

7. English should only be used by students when talking to their teachers.	Frequency	34	22	42	17	34
	Percentage	22.8%	14.8%	28.2%	11.4%	22.8%
8. I want my teacher to permit the use of Arabic by students.	Frequency	10	14	62	34	29
	Percentage	6.7%	9.4%	41.6%	22.8%	19.5%

The table highlights that a significant proportion of participants preferred their teachers to speak English when explaining challenging concepts (statement 1) or introducing new material (statement 2). Their attitudes differed with regard to the use of English when providing exam instructions (statement 3), as about half of the participants opposed the use of English. A significant number of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the constant use of Arabic (statement 4); however, the majority of participants expressed that it did not cause them concern (statement 5). For statements 6, 7 and 8, the participants' attitudes were divided, but a large proportion expressed uncertainty with regard to statement 8.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics for attitudes towards students' use of Arabic and English*

Questionnaire item		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
9. English should only be used by students when they are working on a task as a team.	Frequency	28	36	51	22	12
	Percentage	18.8%	24.2%	34.2%	14.8%	8.1%
10. When talking with my classmates, I do not use Arabic.	Frequency	23	47	32	22	25
	Percentage	15.4%	31.5%	21.5%	14.8%	16.8%
11. I prefer my classmates to use Arabic.	Frequency	37	32	27	22	31
	Percentage	24.8%	21.5%	18.1%	14.8%	20.8%
12. I think I am better understood by my classmates when we talk in Arabic.	Frequency	5	11	23	45	65
	Percentage	3.4%	7.4%	15.4%	30.2%	43.6%

Concerning their use of Arabic and English with their classmates (statements 9, 10 and 11), the participants seemed to have different opinions that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. However, a relatively large proportion agreed and strongly agreed with statement 12, i.e. their classmates understand them better when they communicate in Arabic.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics for attitudes towards the possible impact of using Arabic and English on L2 learning of English*

Questionnaire item		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
13. It is essential to speak only in English in order to improve my English.	Frequency	11	13	28	42	55
	Percentage	7.4%	8.7%	18.8%	28.2%	36.9%
14. I understand English-language lessons better when the teacher speaks Arabic.	Frequency	51	40	32	19	7
	Percentage	34.2%	26.8%	21.5%	12.8%	4.7%
15. I enjoy English-language lessons better when I am permitted to speak Arabic.	Frequency	44	31	30	25	19
	Percentage	29.5%	20.8%	20.1%	16.8%	12.8%
16. Having a teacher who speaks English during lessons is an effective way to learn English.	Frequency	11	16	13	42	67
	Percentage	7.4%	10.7%	8.7%	28.2%	45.0%
17. When the teacher is correcting my mistakes, I prefer him to speak in Arabic.	Frequency	12	76	34	22	5
	Percentage	8.1%	51.0%	22.8%	14.8%	3.4%

Statements 13 and 16 reveal that a large proportion of the participants believed that using English in class would improve their English. The participants' opinions regarding statements 14, 15 and 17 demonstrated that the majority of participants opposed the use of Arabic.

Discussion

This section will discuss the results in terms of the three research questions:

1. Is Arabic used in university-level English language classrooms in Saudi Arabia?
2. To what extent do Saudi students who specialise in English have positive attitudes towards the use of Arabic and English in the English classroom?
3. Do Saudi students assume that the use of Arabic facilitates learning English as a second language?

With regard to research question 1, the results of the background questionnaire indicate that a small proportion of participants (7.4%) reported that they had seldom or never (12.8%) used English. From the results, it is observed that 48.3% of the participants maintained that their teachers seldom or never used Arabic (8.7%). However, 19.5% of the participants reported that their teachers used Arabic sometimes (often 18.1% and always 5.4%). In other words, 43% of the participants reported

that Arabic is used in the English language classroom. This supports studies conducted by De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) and Hall and Cook (2014), who reported that teachers sometimes tend to use their students' L1.

Concerning question 2, the majority of participants (above 70%) expressed a preference for their teachers to use English when explaining challenging concepts or introducing new materials. However, around 55.7% of the participants agreed with statement 3, 'It is necessary for teachers to speak English when conveying important information: for example, exam instructions.' It seems that when it comes to conveying important information, most students preferred the use of their L1 to L2. Probably, since the statement included 'exam instructions', this led most of the participants to disagree with the use of English due to the importance of exam-related matters. This highlighted that the participants did not want to miss any piece of information due to the use of L2 (English). I wonder if their choices might have been different had the statement not featured 'exam instructions'. Participants' preference for the use of Arabic for important matters only was confirmed by the fact that a large majority (80.6%) opposed the constant use of Arabic (statement 4). Nevertheless, a large proportion of participants (78.5%) reported that they did not oppose the use of Arabic by teachers. This could be because they believed, as demonstrated by the results for statement 3, that Arabic may be used by teachers to ensure students understand a matter completely without jeopardising that by using English. The participants were divided between agreeing or disagreeing with regard to statement 6, 'When talking with my teacher, I am more comfortable speaking Arabic', and statement 7, 'English should only be used by students when talking to their teachers.' This could be because the participants considered the use of a mixture of Arabic and English useful when speaking to their teachers in some situations, without having a clear preference for Arabic or English. However, overall, students tend to have lower proficiency levels than their teachers, which could explain why the participants in the present study did not disagree with the use of Arabic by their teachers, and why some (41.6%) were uncertain; 22.8% agreed and 19.5% strongly agreed with statement 8, 'I want my teacher to permit the use of Arabic by students.' This supports the findings of a number of researchers (e.g., Cole, 1998; Cook, 2001) whereby teachers used students' L1 when they have low levels of proficiency.

Regarding statements 9, 'English should only be used by students when they are working on a task as a team', 10, 'When talking with my classmates, I do not use Arabic', and 11, 'I prefer my classmates to use Arabic', their opinions were divided (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). These statements were related to whether or not the participants prefer speaking to their classmates in English or Arabic. However, this division disappeared in their selections for statement 12, 'I think I am better understood by my classmates when we talk in Arabic', as 73.8% of the participants were in favour. This demonstrates that while the participants differed regarding their preference for the use of Arabic and English with their classmates, they agreed that Arabic is preferred when it comes to understanding.

Question 3 addressed whether the use of Arabic would facilitate the learning of English. For statement 13, 'It is essential to speak only in English in order to improve my English', 28.2% of participants agreed and 36.9% strongly agreed. This is similar to how some of them (28.2%) agreed and (45%) strongly disagreed with statement 16, 'Having a teacher who speaks English during lessons is an effective way to learn English.' For statements 14, 15 and 17, more than half

of the participants disagreed that Arabic would make understand their lessons easier (statement 14), make them enjoy their lessons better (statement 15) or make them better understand teachers' corrections (statement 17). The findings revealed that participants maintained that using English would lead to improving their grasp of the language.

The results above support other researchers who found that students do not prefer the use of L1 in the L2 classroom (e.g., Cole, 1998; Cook, 2001; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nazary, 2008; Sharma, 2006). With regard to studies supporting the use of L1 (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2010; Alshammari, 2011; Tang, 2002), it has been demonstrated that the participants' preference for using Arabic was in some specific situations, such as exam instructions (statement 3), or that Arabic is the best tool when speaking to their classmates (statement 12). The reason why the present study's findings differ from other Saudi-based studies (i.e., Al-Nofaie, 2010; Alshammari, 2011) is that Al-Nofaie's study was conducted in an intermediate school while Alshammari's was conducted in a technical college. Moreover, since the participants in the present study were students in an English department, and they had to improve their language given that this is their major, this affected how they viewed the use of Arabic. In other words, it seems that educational background may play a role in students' and learners' attitudes.

Conclusion

The literature pertaining to language learning cites the use of L1 in the L2 classroom as a controversial topic. Views vary concerning whether the use of L1 helps students learn a second language (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2010; Tang, 2002) or not (e.g., Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nazary, 2008; Sharma, 2006). The current study investigated Saudi university students' attitudes towards using Arabic in the English L2 classroom. The results revealed that the participants preferred the use of English over Arabic. They thought that Arabic should only be used by teachers when they are talking about important matters and believed that using English in class is effective for learning English.

About the Author:

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