The Impact of Using First Language (Arabic) in ESL Learning classroom in Libyan High Schools

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Abstract

For many years, scholar always debated whether the use of L1 (First Language) and (MT) mother tongue contributes to the learning and teaching of the L2 (Second Language). A large number of studies were conducted regarding this area. Up until now, researchers could not some to a clear conclusion whether to ban L1 or include it in the field of teaching L2. The paper shed light on proponent's, opponent's and neutral's view point regarding this topic. It also included a number of studies that was conducted on area related to the use of L1 in second language classrooms. This paper investigated whether the use of students' L1 in the classroom by the teacher hinders the teaching of a (TL) target language. It aimed at exploring areas where Arabic should be used in class and it also look at students' preferences of using L1 as well as their expectancy of their teacher's use of L1 in teaching. Data were collected by using a questionnaire and was distributed among thirty high school English teachers. The statistical analysis of the data indicated that ESL teachers and students had high positive perceptions toward the inclusion of L1 in their L2 classes. The findings revealed that the use of L1 served to some extent in teaching pedagogical functions in the classroom such as: explaining grammar and vocabulary.

Key Words: ESL (English as a Second Language), L1 (First Language), L2 (Second Language), MT (Mother Tongue), TL (Target Language).

Introduction

The use of students' first language (L1) has been an issue of debate for many years. The Grammar-Translation method was dominant in second language teaching and learning from the 1840s to the 1940s whose goal was for students to translate from and into their own native language (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Therefore; the use of students' mother tongue (MT) was a medium of instruction and communication during that period (Kelly & Bruen, 2014). Community Language Learning (CLL) approach also supported the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, particularly in early stages of language learning (Richards and Rogers, 2014). Later on, the Direct Method emerged; consequently, the view of L1 use in second language classrooms changed. Direct Method proponents shed light on the importance of intensively exposing students to the target language. Therefore, the use of L1 was strongly prohibited for both, teachers and students (Larsen-Freeman, 2012). The Audio-lingual Method was at the same position of the Direct Method of rejecting the use of L1 in L2 classrooms and argued that L2 should be taught without any translation or any reference to L1.

Krashen & Terrell (1983) who developed the Natural Approach (NA), argued that except the limited L1 use only in the very initial stages of L2 learning, the target language should always be used in the classroom without any translation and use of L1.

- ***Proponent's Viewpoint in the Use of L1 in L2 Classrooms***

A number of scholars such as: Lewis, Storch Wigglesworth supported the use of MT in L2 classrooms and argued that there are beneficial outcomes of that use. Among those scholars is Brookes-Lewis (2009) who stated that the inclusion of L1 in L2 classrooms cannot be avoided, and it probably has a positive contribution to the learning of the target language. Similar to the pervious opinion, Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) mentioned that:

> *"**The use of L1 may provide learners with additional cognitive support that allows them to analyze language and work at a higher level than would be possible where they restricted to sole use of their L2."p.761***

Butzkamm (2003) argued that using MT is not only unavoidable but also essential. Comprehension would not probably take place without it since associating new meanings with L1 is needed. Ellis (2008) who supported the view that L1 has a positive impact in learning an L2 claimed second language learners tend to use the rules of their L1 as a transitional process in learning the rules of the target language. He observed that students tend think in L1 first and then translate their ideas to the L2. In agreement with the other scholars, Auerbach (1993) believed that L1 provides a sense

of security to the learners and allows them to express themselves freely. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English.

- ***Opponent's Viewpoint in the Use of L1 in L2 Classrooms***

Although the use of L1 in ESL learning classroom has a large number of advocates and scholars who support it, there is a group of pessimists who looked at the use of L1 from a negative point of view. For Example; (Harmer, 2001; Swain et al., 2011; Littlewood and Yu, 2011) argued that inclusion of L1 in ESL classrooms do not considerably impact students' learning of the target language. Adding to this, they believed that allowing transfer of the bad language habits from L1 to L2 ; therefore, it should not be allowed.

Many studies by (Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Turnbull and Arnett, 2002) found evidence not only on the negative influence of L1 use, but they found that overuse of L1 reduced the learners' exposure to the target language input ; accordingly, they insisted that in L2 classrooms only the target language should be practiced. Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (1999) claimed that transferring from the L1 to the target language is definitely the fundamental source of errors in the L2 learning. Krashen and Terrel (1983) believed that a maximum exposure to the target language in L2 classroom is essential in order to ensure a comprehensible input for the learners.

- ***Neutral's Viewpoint in the Use of L1 in L2 Classrooms***

A large number of researchers argued that if L1 is used appropriately and necessarily in ESL classrooms, it is beneficial rather than an obstacle (Afzal, 2013; Elridge, 1996; Spahiu, 2013; Voicu, 2012). These researchers preferred to suggest certain features for when and what amount of first language should be used in L2 classrooms. Such features are sometimes based on the purpose of using L1, students' language proficiency level, and duration of the foreign language classes of learners (Afzal, 2013). In the last two decades, researchers have focused on determining *how* and *when* to use L1 and agreeing on a policy regarding the extent to which students and/or teachers will use L1 such that a balance can be achieved (Schweers, 1999).

Schweers, 1997 & Tang, 2002 claimed that it is very difficult to teach L2 with minimal use of L1, especially if the learners are at the elementary or beginner level. Prohibiting students to use their MT is inappropriate. Furthermore; when students are forced to use L2 in the class, it may make them unable to communicate and lead to a great discouragement, feeling confused and unsecured.

- ***Recent Research on the Use of L1 in L2 Classrooms***

The following section includes a summary of a number of researches conducted on the use of L1 in ESL learning classroom:

In (2002) Tang conducted a study with 100 students and 20 teachers in China to examine whether the use of Chinese would have an adverse effect on ESL learning. A blend of interviews, classroom observations and a questionnaire were utilized. The findings indicated that students and teachers generally were in favor of using Chinese.

Also in Qatar, a similar study was conducted by Aqel (2006) to explore the teachers and student attitude towards the use of L1 in at university level and he also found the positive view about use of Arabic whenever it is needed. Another study by Nazary was carried out in (2008) in Iran at university level. The results showed that 85% students, studying various subjects, have positive attitude towards to use of L1 in L2 classes.

Al-Nofaie in (2010) worked on investigating students' and teachers' perspectives of using Arabic in a Saudi ESL girls' intermediate school. The study was conducted with 30 students and three teachers. The findings revealed that students and teachers had positive attitudes towards using Arabic in ESL learning. The results were confirmed by Alshammari in (2011) who held a study of 13 teachers and 95 students in a technical college in Saudi Arabia. He distributed a questionnaire and found that participants had positive attitudes towards the use of Arabic when teaching English.

A study conducted in Croatia by Kovacic and Kirinic (2011) which examined students' and teachers' preferences towards the use of Croatian in English classrooms. The two groups were found to have positive perceptions using Croatian in the class; 56% of students and 45% of teachers considered the use of L1 in t2he classroom is beneficial and important.

In (2014) Kelly and Bruen conducted a study which aimed at investigating teachers and students' views of the use of L1 in the higher education levels. The results revealed that teachers took a neutral position and accepted the use of L1 only in limited situations, for example, when explaining high level concepts and when creating a relaxed environment for students.

Research Questions

1. Are ESL teachers, who speak students' native language, with or against the use of students' first language in ESL classrooms?
2. What areas of language teaching do ESL teachers believe L1 should be used for?

Methodology

Instrument

A questionnaire was administered, and divided into three sections a) Background Section; and b) Attitudinal Section, and c) Necessity to use L1 in ESL classrooms Section. The background section consisted of five items that addressed basic information about the participants, such as their age and when they started teaching English, and their MT Language**.** The second section consisted of a number of statements that showed the participants' attitude towards the use of Arabic in classroom, and their attitude towards their students. The third section of the questionnaire identified the most common areas of language teaching in which L1 is believed to be necessary. See Appendix A.

Participants

Thirty Teachers of English language who are aged between 30 to 45 years. These teachers were specialized in teaching English for first, second, and third grades of secondary school for at least 4 years. They taught in Libyan public secondary schools such as; Al Khansaa, Al Fwaihaat and the like.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was conducted on L2 teachers of English in Libyan High Schools. The participants will be asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements. The statements were scaled on 4-points from 1=strongly disagree and 4=strongly agree. Data were calculated in terms of the percentage on every statement and then 'mean' was calculated to measure the degree of overall opinion about each statement. Consequently, the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to find the frequencies, percentages and mean scores.

Results

Question 1: Are ESL teachers, who speak students' native language, with or against the use of students' first language in ESL classrooms?

The first section in the questionnaire is about the frequency of using English in the class by the teacher and the statistical results (figure 1) showed that around 42.66% of the teachers usually use L2 inside the classroom.

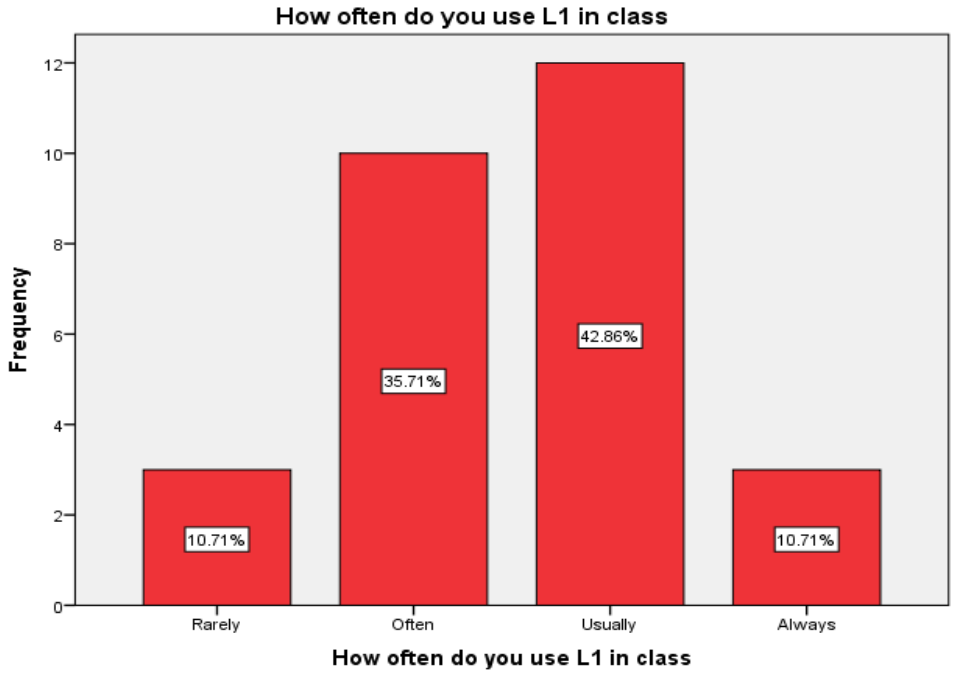


Figure 1: Frequency of using L1 in class.

Question 2: What areas of language teaching do ESL teachers believe L1 should be used for?

From the statistical analysis we can infer that the majority of the teachers (66%) prefer using English in communication, whether this communication is between the teacher and the student or among the students themselves as shown in (figures 2 and 3).

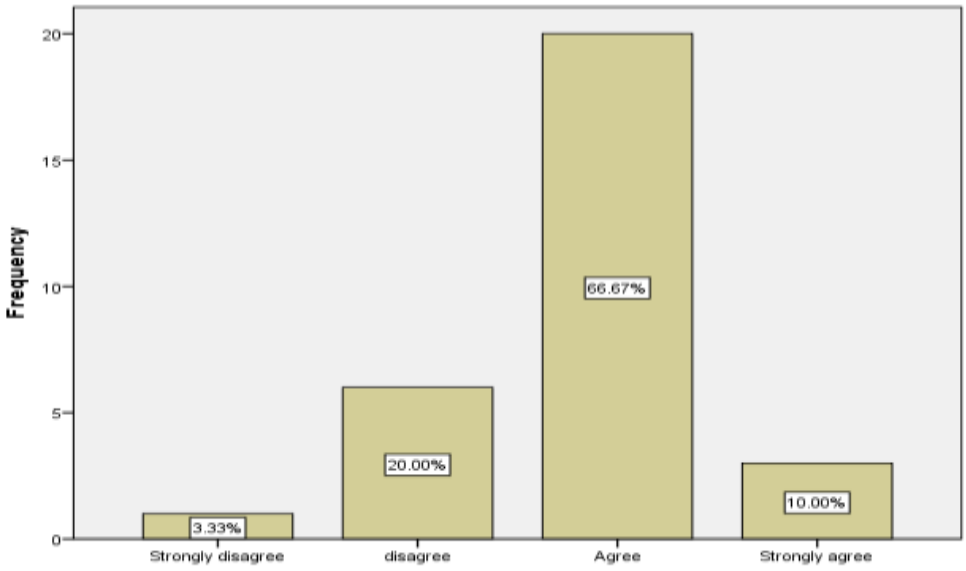


Figure 2: communication with the teacher should only be in English

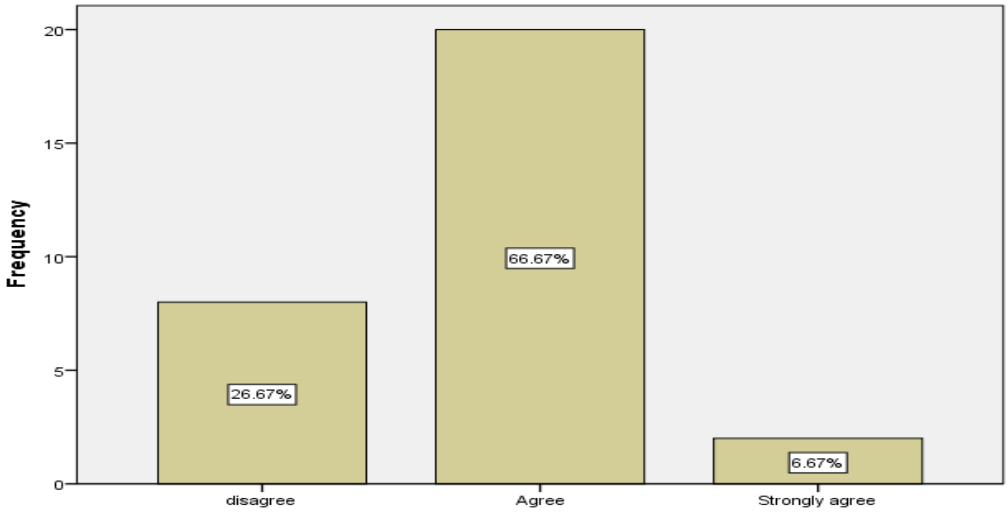


Figure 3: communication with classmates should only be in English.

Also, the results showed the students' preference of using MT by the teacher in explaining the lesson, that is to say, most teachers agreed that students expect the teacher to use Arabic in explaining the lesson once the teacher uses MT in class as clarified in (figure 4).

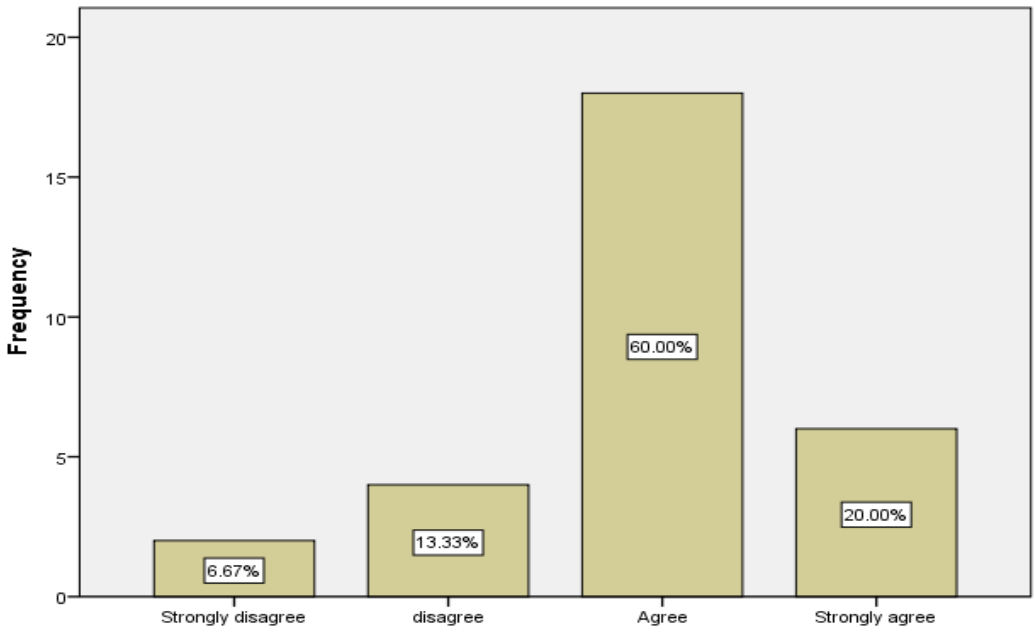


Figure 4: Student's expectancy of using (MT) in class.

Furthermore; 43% of the teachers believe that students tend to use Arabic in class as a tool of translation. As shown in (figure 5) below, students acquire the language more easily and quickly when they compare the two languages. Especially when teachers explain grammar or vocabulary, they use Arabic for making comparisons and clarifications.

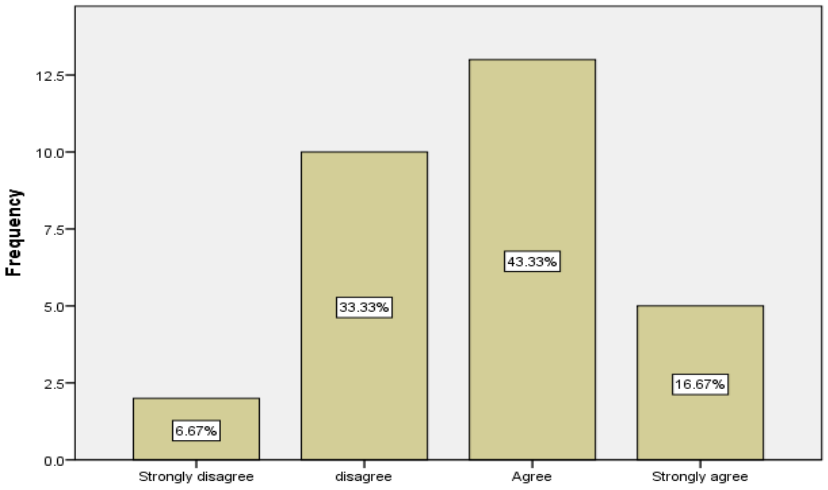


Figure 5: Comparing (MT) to English helps in acquiring L2.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating Libyan teacher's perspective of using Arabic in English classrooms. Its main target was to find which areas of language English should be used for and whether the use of MT helps students in acquiring English.

From the above findings and discussion one can conclude that most Libyan high school teachers believed that using English in the classroom is more beneficial and effective in order to acquire L2. However; they tend to use Arabic in class regarding to the lack of knowledge and competence of the students as the results showed that the majority of teachers and students felt more comfortable using Arabic in teaching. Adding to the above, that using Arabic in classroom may not hinder acquiring L2, on the other hand; it may be an effective instrument for teaching a second language. That is to say, L1 (Arabic) might be used as foundational platform for the building up of English.

The significance of this study showed that L1 (Arabic) may facilitate acquiring the target language. Even though some teachers believe that using Arabic in class reduces the chance of learning the second language, surprisingly enough; the results of this

study revealed the opposite where teachers relied most of the time on L1 while teaching.

To sum it up, using Arabic in class appeared to have great potentials as a sufficient methodological instrument in enhancing L2 learning. Furthermore, L2 teachers should be encouraged to maintain a balanced pedagogical method between L1 and L2 in order to achieve the maximum level of L2 learning.

According to the researcher's point of view, in order to add more value to the study a follow-up interview with the teachers would have increased the reliability of the research. However, due to the fact that this study was conducted on a short period of time, the participants could not be interviewed. Therefore, further studies can use a questionnaire supported by follow-up interviews and/or classroom observations.

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Appendix A

The Questionnaire:

A) Background Section

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Years of experience: _____
4. Job title: _____
5. Mother tongue: _____

B) Attitudinal Section

1. How often do you use L1 in class?
   A) Never.
   B) Rarely.
   C) Often.
   D) Usually.
   E) Always.
2. When communicating with the teacher, students should only use English.
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.
3. Students should only use English when communicating with their classmates.
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.
4. Teachers should use English the entire time, regardless how much English students choose to use.
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.
5. The use of students' mother tongue slows down the process of acquiring English
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.
6. Once I use students' mother tongue, my students always expect me to explain things in their mother tongue.
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.

7. Comparing students' mother tongue and English helps students to acquire English.
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.
8. Students learn better using bilingual materials (materials with little use of mother tongue, e.g., instruction in Arabic and exercises written in English)
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.
9. Students learn better using bilingual dictionaries (Arabic-English instead of English-English dictionary)
   A) Agree.
   B) Strongly agree.
   C) Disagree.
   D) Strongly disagree.

c) Necessity to use L1 Section

1. In your opinion, what is students' mother tongue supposed to be used for? (You can choose more than one)
   A) Giving instructions
   B) Giving feedback to students.
   C) Checking comprehension.
   D) Explaining new words
   E) Explaining grammar
   F) Discussing assignments, tests, and quizzes.
   G) Helping students feel more comfortable and confident in the classroom
   H) Explaining administrative information (syllabus, announcements, deadlines, etc.)
   I) Others: ……..
2. How do you feel when you use students' L1 in the classroom?
   A) Guilty or embarrassed.
   B) Comfortable.
   C) Other: ……..

Adopted from Al-Amir (2017)

تأثير استعمال اللغة العربية في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية لطلبة المرحلة الثانوية

اعداد: عزيزة الديباني
كليات اللغات– جامعة بنغازى

المستخلص:

منذ عدة سنوات, ناقش العلماء مدى تأثير استعمال اللغة الأم على تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية حيث أن عدد كثير من الدراسات قد ناقشت هذا الموضوع. حتى وقتنا هذا لم تصل الأبحاث الى نتيجة واضحة بخصوص حذف أو أضافة اللغة الأم في تعليم اللغة الثانية. سلطت هذه الورقة الضوء على أراء المؤيدين والمعارضين وكذلك المحايدين في هذا الموضوع، كذلك تناول البحث بعض الدراسات تلتي أجريت في هذا الصدد. بالإضافة الى ذلك تناول البحث ما إذا كانت الدراسة بالغة الأم قد تعيق اللغة المستهدفة.

لقد كان الهدف من البحث التعرف على اكتشاف المساحات التي يمكن فيها استعمال اللغة العربية في الفصل الدراسي ومدى تفضيل الطلبة لاستخدام اللغة الأم و توقعاتهم بردود أفعال المعلمين باستعمال اللغة الأم في التدريس.

نتائج البحث تم جمعها باستخدام استبيان الأسئلة والذي تم توزيعه على عدد ثلاثون مدرسا من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الثانوية. دلت نتائج التحليل الاحصائي على أن المدرسين والطلبة على حد سواء كانت لهم مؤشرات إيجابية اتجاه تضمين اللغة الأم في برنامج الدراسة باللغة الثانية. كذلك أوضحت الدراسة أن استعمال اللغة العربية ساهم الى حد ما في وظائف منهجية التعليم، على سبيل المثال في شرح القواعد والمفردات.