

## *The Attitudes of Libyan Teachers Towards Using Their Mother Tongue in English in Secondary Schools Classrooms*

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper investigates the attitudes of the Libyan EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers towards using their mother tongue (L1) in English classrooms in secondary schools in Bani Walid. Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used for data collection. This study was conducted on 36 EFL teachers teaching at public secondary schools in Bani Walied, using a questionnaire survey, and 8 teachers were observed. The findings revealed that the teachers hold positive attitudes towards using Arabic in EFL classes. The EFL teachers in the study preferred using the mother tongue for various situations and purposes. In addition, they employed its use and recognized its usefulness in certain contexts such as clarifying the meaning, giving proper instructions, explaining grammar rules and checking students' understanding. The discussion of the findings concludes that the mother tongue can be used by teachers to facilitate teaching and learning and to save time. Moreover, the language used in the classroom plays a major role in the process of EFL teaching as it directly influences the acquisition of English (L2).*

**Keywords:** Teachers, Attitudes, Mother tongue, L1 (Arabic), L2 (English), Secondary schools, Bani Walied.

### **ملخص:**

إن هذه الورقة العلمية بصدد استكشاف آراء معلمين اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه استخدام لغتهم الأم داخل الفصول لتعليم اللغة الانجليزية في المدارس الثانوية في مدينة بني وليد. تم استخدام كل من الأساليب الكمية والنوعية لجمع البيانات، حيث أجريت هذه الدراسة على 36 معلماً للغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية يدرسون في المدارس الثانوية الحكومية في مدينة بني وليد وتم ملاحظة 8 مدرسين. أظهرت نتائج البحث أن المعلمين لديهم مواقف ايجابية حول استخدام اللغة العربية في فصول اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، حيث فضل معلمو اللغة الانجليزية استخدام لغتهم الأم في العديد من المواقف والأغراض، حيث فضلوا استخدامها وأدركوا فائدتها في سياقات معينة مثل توضيح المعاني، إعطاء التعليقات المناسبة، شرح القواعد النحوية والتحقق من فهم الطلاب. كما تضمنت مناقشة النتائج إلي أنه يمكن للمدرسين استخدام اللغة الأولى لتسهيل التعليم والتعلم وتوفير الوقت. علاوة على ذلك، تلعب اللغة المستخدمة في الفصل الدراسي دوراً رئيسياً في عملية تدريس اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية لأنها تؤثر بشكل مباشر على اكتساب اللغة الثانية. الكلمات الافتتاحية: معلمون، آراء، اللغة الأم، اللغة الأولى (اللغة العربية)، اللغة الثانية (اللغة الانجليزية)، المدارس الثانوية، بني وليد.

### ***Introduction:***

Teachers' strategies and practices in the classroom influence the success of learning English as a foreign language (Celik & Aydan, 2018). Researchers and language teachers have long debated the issues surrounding the use of students' L1 in L2 (Adnan, Mohammad, Yusoff, Ghazali, 2014; Sadighi, Rahimpour, Rezaei, 2018). Most of the Libyan teachers speak the Arabic language even though they are trying to teach the English language. This is a very common phenomenon, especially in public schools.

Within this context, this research commences with an attempt to find out teachers' perceptions towards the use of Arabic (L1) in English language classrooms, and the practices teachers follow when using of L1.

### ***Literature review:***

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. Al-Nofaie (2010) carried out a study to examine the attitudes of three teachers and 30 students toward using L1 in English classes. She noticed that many teachers used L1 to explain grammar and new vocabulary. The findings showed that the participants' use of L1 seems to be systematic. The results gave support to the assumption that advanced learners manifest good progress when L1 is used. The learners' level and the teachers' professional experience also affected the degree to which teachers resort to L1. (p:69). 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. On the whole, the teachers who responded in the studies illustrated above appeared to state positive views regarding the use of the L1.

### ***Statement of the problem:***

Despite the fact that the issue of using L1 in L2 classrooms has grown in importance in light of recent research, few studies have been carried out to investigate the teachers' attitudes towards using the students' mother tongue in English classrooms in Libya. Thereby, the main concern of this paper is to find out the attitudes of Libyan teachers of secondary schools towards using the Arabic language in English classrooms in Bani Walied.

### ***The Objectives of the Research:***

The objectives of this study is to investigate the attitudes of Libyan EFL teachers towards using the mother tongue in English classrooms; and whether teachers hold positive or negative attitudes towards using Arabic in teaching the English language. In addition, this research aims to find out to what extent teachers' attitudes match their current teaching practices. Therefore, this research attempts to give deeper insight into the reasons behind using their mother tongue in their English classrooms instead of using English.

### ***Research Questions:***

This research intends to address the following questions:

1. What are the teachers' attitudes towards the use of Arabic in English classrooms in secondary schools in Libya?
2. To what extent is Arabic as (L1) used by Libyan secondary school teachers in English classrooms?
3. Finally, what are the reasons behind using of the students' mother tongue in English language classroom?

### ***Methodology:***

In order to secure the data for this investigation, a mixed-methods a approaches was adopted. A questionnaire as a quantitative instrument and structured classroom observation as a qualitative one. The questionnaire was designed by using a five-point Likert scale. Although the copies of the questionnaire were distributed to 50 teachers teaching in public secondary schools in Bani walled, 36 participants returned the questionnaire copies back. Since the participants' report does not match their real actions inside the classrooms, a classroom observation was carried out. The classroom observation sessions, which involved 8 teachers, were conducted by using a structured- checklist, which included eight items, to find out whether or not L1 is used in L2 classrooms, and for what purposes.

### ***Results and discussion:***

Findings of the study regarding teachers' attitudes toward the use of L1 in L2 classrooms are presented in this section. Table (1) illustrates the impact of using Arabic in L2 classrooms. The tables below display the responses as percentage scores.

**Table (1): Descriptive statistics for the impact of using Arabic in L2 classrooms**

No	Statement	Strongly agree	agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Students express their confusion better in Arabic	15%	35%	15%	26%	9%
2	Students benefit from feedback given in Arabic.	8%	31%	28%	22%	11%
3	Using Arabic saves valuable class time	11%	28%	22%	25%	14%
4	Using the Arabic language reduces the learners' stress	39%	5%	31%	19%	6%
5	Students should only use English in the class to learn English faster.	30%	30%	19%	16%	5%
6	The excessive use of Arabic may hinder learning English	22%	31%	25%	19%	3%
7	Using the Arabic language makes teachers more confident in teaching	3%	22%	28%	22%	25%

The table highlights that a large proportion of participants believed that students express their confusion better in Arabic (statement 1) and they benefit from feedback given in their mother tongues (statement 2). Statement (3) reveals that the participants seemed to have different opinions that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A relatively large proportion strongly agreed with statement (4). Statement (5) reveal that more than half of the participants believe that using only English in the class would improve students' language. However, a significant number of participants opposed the excessive use of Arabic (statement 6). A large proportion expressed neutrality with regard to statement (7).

**Table 2: descriptive statistics for the purposes of using Arabic in English classrooms**

No	Statement	Strongly agree	agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
8	Using the Arabic language helps learners to understand new concepts.	16.66%	41.66%	27.77%	5.55%	8.33%
9	Using the Arabic language helps learners to understand grammatical points better	19.44%	41.66%	13.88%	22.22%	2.77%
10	I use Arabic to explain complex ideas	11%	57%	23%	6%	3%
11	I use the Arabic language to give instructions only.	2%	19%	11%	38%	11%
12	Using the Arabic language helps teachers to control the class	5%	14%	17%	31%	33%
13	Students' weakness in understanding the lesson forces the teacher to speak Arabic in English classrooms.	23%	40%	11%	17%	9%
14	English language cannot be understood unless L1 is used for clarification	8%	22%	38%	27%	5%
15	English language should dominate English classrooms interaction.	33%	42%	14%	5%	6%
16	Using the Arabic language should be the last resort for explaining meaning.	31%	36%	17%	8%	8%

Statements (8, 9) and (10) reveal that the majority of the participants preferred using L1 when they explain new concepts, grammar rules or explaining complex ideas. Whereas, their attitudes differed with regard to the use of Arabic in giving instructions (Statement 11). A considerable number of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with regard to statement (12). It's clear that most of the teachers stated that they are forced to use L1 because of the students' weakness in understanding L2 (Statement 13). Statements (14, 15) and (16) reveal that the participants are in favor of the purposeful use of the L1 and against the excessive use of it.

The results of the current study showed consistency with many research studies (e.g. AL-NOFAIE, 2010; Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Khassawneh, 2011; Macias & Kephart, 2009) in that L1 was perceived as a facilitating tool rather than a barrier in learning English. In the current study, positive attitudes clearly dominated the negative voices regarding L1's use in English class among the informants.

EFL teachers highlighted the importance of L1 in their classes, however, they were aware that the excessive use of Arabic may hinder learning English. These findings were in line with some previous studies such as, in Kharma and Hajjaj's (1989) study, (93%) of the 185 teachers used Arabic in their classrooms for different reasons. Similarly, Al-Abdan's (1993) study pointed out that not only 75% of the 451 Saudi teachers used Arabic with their students for certain cases, but also they were convinced of the benefits of this use. Concerning room class control, more than half of the group study teachers stated that they do not use Arabic for managerial purposes like class control. Most teachers indicated that they use L1 for explaining meaning to help their students understand new concepts. They also use Arabic to simplify grammar rules to their students. As a result, they think when they use Arabic they save class time instead of wasting it in explaining the content. Since the students' level is very weak, teachers are forced to speak the students' mother tongue. Most of the participants stated that the English language can not be understood unless Arabic is used for clarification. The participating teachers also think that the English language should dominate English classroom interaction, but within Bani-Walied, it is difficult for teachers to communicate with their students in English as they have very limited English vocabulary. Thus L1 encourages students to communicate with teachers. Therefore, students express their confusion better in their mother tongue. The teachers also disagreed that using Arabic contributes to their confidence when teaching English. The teachers believed that the use of Arabic is helpful when conveying meaning is difficult. Moreover, they indicated that the students benefit from feedback given in Arabic and reduces the learners' stress. From the

study, it has also been found that giving instructions to L1 students can help the students understand better and follow the class more easily.

Generally, It is concluded that the teachers neither encourage the use of Arabic in English language classrooms; nor its prohibited.

The observation results showed that all the observed lessons involved the usage of Arabic and it was clear that the observed teachers could not avoid the use of the students' mother tongue in their classes. Therefore, the teachers always switch automatically to the Arabic language in the classroom. Some teachers used the target language (English) to explain some words several times, but received no response from the students. As a result, Arabic is used as a last resort to save time. Moreover, the observed teachers use Arabic language to make sure that the meaning is fully understood and that can keep the flow of the lesson running smoothly. In addition, the observed teachers assume that the use of L1 is important for explaining long and complex instructions.

**Table 3: The overall times spent in all classes on using L1**

The purpose of using Arabic	The overall times of using L1
Translate new lexical items	60 times
Giving instructions	50 times
Explain exercises	16 times
Explain Grammatical rules	32 times
Check students' comprehension	21 times
To ask questions	10 times
To organize classroom setting	9 times
To summarize the lesson	8 times

As shown in table (3) the overall times spent on using L1 in the observed classes was 206 times which are divided into 60 times to translate new lexical items, 50 times to give instructions, 32 times to explain grammatical rules, 16 times to explain the requirement of the exercises in their books and 21 times to check students' comprehension. 10 times to ask questions, 9 times to organize classroom setting and 8 times to summarize the lesson. The observation results show that each observed lesson involved at least some usage of L1. In other words, no instances of not using the L1 in L2 teaching and learning were observed during the observation sessions.

It was observed that the most frequent cases in which L1 was used were translating new lexical items and the least frequent purposes in which Arabic was used were summarizing the lesson.

In some cases, e.g. when an unknown word appeared, the students asked the teacher for a translation which usually led to an explanation in Arabic. The teachers occasionally spent a minute or two explaining the meaning of a word or an expression in L1. When explaining a new grammar element, the teachers used

L1 to point out the differences between the two languages. As a result, the students rely on teachers' explanations in their mother tongue since they know that their teachers will explain it in Arabic. Consequently, they do not pay attention to teachers' explanations in English.

### **Conclusion:**

The research results demonstrated that L1 is always present in English classrooms. It also showed that teachers had positive attitudes toward using the Arabic language in English lessons. The participating subjects believed that they should be allowed to use the learners' mother tongue in English classrooms. The teachers indicated that the use of Arabic may be beneficial in learning English language. However, the excessive use of Arabic might limit the students' opportunities to practice the English language. In addition, the students' proficiency level affects the teachers' attitudes toward the use of Arabic in English lessons. Teachers tended to use the L1 more than they believed they should. Therefore, 'something' happens in the classroom that forces teachers to use the L1 more than they would wish to. In this study context, it is noted that low-level students understanding the English language force teachers to speak the students' mother tongue in order to help them learn English. Teachers also think that students prefer to speak their mother tongue as it helps them to express their confusion. Moreover, they think that using L1 decreases the students' anxiety and stress. The results of this research can prove that L1 can be a beneficial tool for L2 learning and L1 can bring a positive attitude and sense of security to the process of learning English. The idea of total prohibition or avoidance of L1 in EFL classrooms was not supported by most of the secondary school teachers in the present study. The use of L1 in EFL lessons is, without any doubt, a highly debatable topic, and the opinions on this issue vary. However, using as much L2 as possible along with the sound use of L1 may be considered appropriate for both EFL teachers and learners.

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