

EXPLORING THE USE OF L1 IN ALGERIAN EFL EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION AMONG FIRST-YEAR SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN BATNA*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to delve into the utilization of the mother tongue (Arabic) by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in the Algerian context. Employing a qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews and observed nine first-year secondary school teachers across six schools in Batna city center, accumulating a total observation time of 16 hours. Analysis of both the interviews and classroom observations reveals that teachers primarily use L1 as an organizational and affective tool and occasionally as an academic one. In the former, it serves to manage the classroom, redirect the learners towards the task at hand, reproach them for not possessing prior knowledge, and express teachers' frustration. In the latter, it is employed for explaining new vocabulary items and grammar rules, clarifying concepts and instructions, checking learners' understanding, giving feedback, and bridging cultural gaps. Additionally, our findings indicate that L1 is used cautiously and only when deemed necessary, as teachers believe that its overuse hinders learning the target language (TL) and reinforces undesirable cognitive habits such as thinking in Arabic when using English.

Key words: *Mother tongue, Functions, Algerian EFL context, Qualitative approach.*

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language in Algeria presents a unique set of challenges, with the classroom serving as the primary arena for learners' exposure to this global language. Within this context, the appropriate use of their L1 emerges as a pivotal factor influencing the effectiveness of English language instruction. It is widely acknowledged that the appropriate use of L1 can contribute to fostering a stress-free atmosphere conducive to language learning. Consequently, Algerian EFL secondary school teachers often resort to Arabic to support students' comprehension and engagement in the classroom. This article endeavors to delve deeper into the use

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of L1 in the aforementioned context, exploring its multifaceted implications for English language instruction and learner development.

2. Theoretical Framework

The use of the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages (FLs) remains a controversial topic. Two opposing views have emerged: The monolingual view and the view supporting the use of L1 in L2 instruction. The exclusive L2 language instruction posits that utilizing L1 would reduce exposure to L2. Atkinson (1993) argues that relying solely on English increases opportunities for acquiring the FL because communication becomes closer to authentic language use situations. Additionally, Atkinson asserts that the EFL teacher should not use L1 in the classroom because he is the primary source of suitable input in the TL for the learner and he is responsible for maximizing its use in the classroom given that exposure to the TL outside the classroom is very limited in the EFL context. Overall, proponents of the monolingual approach argue that incorporating L1 in the EFL classroom would hinder progress and restrict both input and output of L2. Consequently, they suggest discouraging teachers and learners from employing it in EFL classrooms (e.g., Phillipson, 1992; McMillan & Rivers, 2011).

An alternative perspective in FL instruction presents a contrasting viewpoint, suggesting pedagogical benefits in utilizing L1. Advocates of this approach contend that excessive reliance on L2 could potentially hinder learners' cognitive and emotional development. Grim (2010) suggests that when learners are compelled to use the TL, they resort to L1 for internal dialogue, recalling learned grammar rules and preparing their answers in the TL. This creates an additional cognitive load on him and prevents him from directing and allocating his cognitive resources to the learning task. Swain and Lapkin (2000) contend that the exclusion of L1 in performing complex learning tasks deprives the learners from an important cognitive tool. Instead, they propose that L1 can serve as a valuable tool to facilitate the development of L2 proficiency, aiding in linguistic and cognitive growth, as well as fostering emotional well-being (Atkinson, 1993; Macaro, 2001; Butzkamm, 2003; Cummins, 2007; Qian, Tian & Wang, 2009). Moreover, Turnbull (2001) suggests that employing L1 can save time in EFL classrooms, especially when students encounter difficulties in grasping complex grammar concepts or vocabulary. However, it is argued that while using L1, precautions should be taken, and the extent of L2 usage should be kept to a maximum level (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Macaro, 2001).

3. Relevant Literature

Kim and Petraki (2009) examine teachers' attitudes towards employing L1 within a Korean school environment in Vietnam. The findings revealed a positive reception among teachers regarding the use of L1, with reports indicating its utilization in English classes for elucidating the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases, orchestrating lesson activities, and clarifying grammatical concepts. Similarly, Yao (2011) observes favorable attitudes among EFL teachers regarding the adoption of L1

in language classrooms. Through the analysis of 15 audio-recorded lessons and semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers, Sali (2014) explores their perceptions of L1 usage and identifies three functional categories: academic, managerial, and socio-cultural. Furthermore, Qian, Tian, and Wang (2009) investigate the employment of L1 by Chinese EFL primary school teachers, discovering its application in delivering clear instructions and eliciting student responses.

In the Turkish educational landscape, Şenel (2010) finds that teachers frequently resort to L1 to assess comprehension levels, explicate the definitions of new vocabulary, and elucidate complex linguistic structures. Kırkgöz (2017) delves into the practices of five secondary school English teachers in Turkish public schools, revealing that L1 was predominantly employed for instructional purposes, classroom management, linguistic explanations, and fostering rapport. While emphasizing English as the primary mode of communication, educators acknowledged the pedagogical value of integrating Turkish when deemed necessary.

Negadi (2021) explores the dynamics of L1 usage among EFL adult beginners in the Algerian context. Administering a survey to 20 EFL students, the study probed into their motivations for code-switching behavior in English classes. The results indicated that strategic use of L1 provided linguistic benefits, such as clarification of grammar rules and unfamiliar vocabulary, as well as social advantages, including time-saving, anxiety reduction, and promotion of fluency development. Furthermore, Bougheda and Ziane (2022) examines the use of L1 in first-year middle school English classes, noting its role as a direct teaching aid to address comprehension issues among learners. Their classroom observations led to the conclusion that most teachers tend to rely on L1 when teaching English to beginners, citing reasons such as low English proficiency and the absence of visual aids.

Although numerous studies have explored the utilization of L1 in EFL instruction within the Algerian educational landscape, there remains a compelling necessity to delve deeper into its use within secondary school settings, particularly focusing on teacher practices. This study endeavors to address the following questions:

1. What are the primary purposes driving the use of L1 by EFL first-year secondary school teachers in Batna?
2. What diverse techniques are employed for integrating L1 within the EFL classroom environment?

4. Methodology

To understand the various purposes and characteristics of L1 usage among the targeted EFL teachers, the present study embraced a qualitative approach. This choice stemmed from the open-ended nature of the formulated inquiries, which eschew predefined indicators. Targeting first-year secondary school level was deliberate, as students at this stage are deemed intermediate learners, proficient enough to comprehend TL lessons independently after four years of studying English as a subject. Using convenience sampling, ten teachers were chosen to be surveyed and observed but only nine consented to participate voluntarily. They belong to different age groups with an average age of 38.11. Data collection relied on two

instruments: semi-structured interviews, designed to probe the study's research questions, and classroom observations guided by a checklist informed by relevant literature. This triangulation bolstered the study's credibility. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software, with researchers assigning pseudonyms to participants for confidentiality, following a format based on the first two letters of their first and last names (e.g., James Brown = JB).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Functions of L1 in EFL classes

Although it is widely believed that most EFL teachers avoid using L1 in the classroom, observations have revealed practical applications for its use. The detected functions are divided into two categories: 1). Academic functions and 2). managerial and affective ones.

5.1.1. Academic functions

• Explanation of new vocabulary items

Classroom observation revealed that teachers shift from English to Arabic to explain new words or clarify complex grammatical rules, thereby facilitating students' comprehension and enhancing the learning process. Teacher SC, for instance, used L1 to explain the words "bucket", "beater", and "hydrology" in the activity of listening and speaking in Unit Four "Eureka". Similarly, Teacher NA shared her method, "At the beginning of the unit, I ask my pupils to translate all the unfamiliar words into Arabic. They write them in their notebooks, so when we start the unit, they do not encounter any difficulty. Then things go reasonably well."

• Clarification of concepts and instructions

L1 is employed to clarify concepts and instructions. In the classroom observation, we witnessed this function in action. During a grammar lesson focusing on the past perfect tense, Teacher KY noticed a perplexed expression on some students' faces. Instead of persisting solely with English, she tactfully switched to Arabic to ensure clarity. She said, "الماضي التام ثم البسيط" as we say 'He had finished his homework before he went to bed.'" The strategic integration of L2 in this context not only clarifies the concept but also aids in building a bridge between the students' existing linguistic knowledge and the new grammatical structure. This fosters the students' understanding and enhances accessibility to the lesson content.

• Checking learners' understanding

In addition to elucidating new vocabulary items and clarifying concepts and instructions, observations have unveiled that L1 is also utilized for ensuring learners' understanding of meaning of new forms and words. Having explained the meaning of "bald" in English, teacher NA asked, "bald؟ ما معنى" A student replied, "My friend (pointing at this desk mate) is not bald." Then the teacher commented, "Good, ليس صلح". Although the student provided an example that mirrors his good understanding of the intended word, the teacher translated the example into L1 to further confirm the clarity of the meaning.

• Correcting errors and giving feedback

In the observed EFL classrooms, the use of L1 for error correction and feedback emerged as a pivotal pedagogical strategy, enhancing students' language proficiency. During a speaking activity focused on pronunciation, Teacher DL noticed consistent mispronunciations of a specific vowel sound. To provide immediate correction, she used Arabic, advising, "انتبهوا إلى صوت الحرف. يجب أن يكون. هكذا" and proceeds to model the correct pronunciation. Similarly, Teacher IR used L1 in error correction and feedback. When a student mistakenly wrote on the board "has wented" trying to conjugate the verb "went" in the present perfect, she used L1 to provide targeted feedback saying, "لا لاحظ الافعال الشاذة. وليس wented". Teacher NA also used L1 for error correction. When a student wrote on the board "key board", she said, "لوحة المفاتيح كلمة واحدة بدون فراغ"

Reflecting on this usage, teacher IR asserted that L1 is sometimes more effective in error correction as it enables teachers to offer clear explanations and guidance on how to rectify mistakes. She added that this approach not only provides a quick intervention for individual students but also serves as a valuable learning moment for the entire class. Teacher NA also agreed with her colleague on this point and added that the use of L1 for this specific purpose creates a supportive and non-threatening environment which encourages students to actively engage in the learning process without fear of making mistakes.

• Bridging cultural gaps

Several instances of using L1 for cultural and contextual bridging in the EFL classroom have been witnessed in our observations. In the lesson of phone etiquette, teacher BA incorporated Arabic to draw comparisons between Algerian phone greetings and western ones saying, "على عكس الثقافات الغربية، في ثقافتنا الجزائرية بل في الثقافات العربية بشكل عام تكون التحية مطولة أكثر. نحن عادة نسال عن الصحة والأهل قبل الخوض في الموضوع". Furthermore, during the "Once Upon a Time" unit, when Teacher IR presented a brief video featuring Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, showcasing Ali Baba's discovery of treasure in the thieves' den and his generous sharing with his brother Cassim, she utilized L1 to highlight the shared value of generosity across all Arab cultures. She remarked, "هذا الكرم نجده تقريبا في جميع قصصنا الشعبية", emphasizing the prevalence of this virtue in almost all our folktales. Both teachers commented on using the mother tongue for this specific function saying that L1 enhances the learners' appreciation of L2 and makes the learning experience more meaningful and relatable. Teacher BA emphasized, "Arabic is sometimes effective in creating a sense of inclusivity and belonging".

5.1.2. Organizational and affective functions

In these situations, the use L1 is deemed essential, fulfilling organizational purposes, and sometimes addressing affective needs. EFL teachers may employ L1 either with the entire class or specifically with learners who have lower proficiency levels in L2 to maintain classroom management or adjust behavior.

• Organizing and managing the class

Classroom observations have revealed the use of L1 by teachers to inquire about whether late students or those who were absent have brought the required

entrance paper. Seven observed teachers used L1 to ask “بني/بنيتي، أحضرت ورقة؟” “الدخول؟”. When asked to elaborate on their use of L1 in this context, all seven teachers emphasized that the use of Arabic guarantees comprehension among students, particularly those with low English proficiency.

In situations where teachers have to deal with managerial, organizational, and disciplinary issues, they find L1 more effective. This is because the instructions formulated in English may not be fully understood by most of the learners. Therefore, teachers opt for Arabic to facilitate learners’ understanding of their intentions, prioritizing the maintenance of order within the class. Teachers recognize that using English may delay the progress of lessons if non-compliance with instructions is due the language barrier.

Classroom observation has also revealed situations in which teachers transitioned from English to L1 to perform the same functions. While dictating a text, Teacher IR noticed that learners were repeating after her despite her instruction not to, so she said, “I will repeat what I dictated.” Since students kept repeating after her, she shifted to L1 saying, “ماتعاودوش ورايا راح تغلطوا زملائكم”. Similarly, Teacher DL initially instructed students in English to refrain from assisting a student with filling gaps in a text on the board. When met with non-compliance, she resorted to Arabic, urging, “خليوه يحاول”

• Redirecting learners towards the task at hand

Teachers resort to L1 when learners show disinterest in the learning task. In such cases, the teacher has no choice but to use L1 as an effective means to refocus them on it. For example, when Teacher SC asked learners about the gist in the reading session, and received minimal response, she used L1 to remind them of the purpose they came for and reprimand them saying “راكم هنا باش تقرأوا وتفهموا النص”

Even Teacher RM, who typically avoids using L1 and encourages her students to communicate solely in English, recalled an incident where her students were exceptionally noisy and inattentive. She stated, “I finished the lesson with great efforts, then I stopped everything and said to them in Arabic: هذا هو الدرس كله مكتوب على السبورة. I asked them to copy it down on their copybooks. At that time, diligent students blamed the undisciplined ones, apologized on their behalf, and promised to stop the noise and concentrate with my explanation”.

• Expressing frustration

In the current study, all participating teachers were noted to employ L1 to different degrees when they feel frustrated with their students’ behaviors. This usage serves the purpose of conveying to learners the depth of their frustration and irritation. Teachers vent their frustrations only when they are certain that learners have understood their feelings of anger. One observed teacher got angry when most of the students did not bring the textbook saying, “ماقلتلكمش وأكدت الحصة الماضية مايجيش” “واحد بلا كتاب”

It is worth mentioning that teachers do not always resort to using L1 in cases of frustration and anger towards the learners. Observations have documented instances where teachers expressed their anger in English. However, if learners remain unresponsive, teachers find no effective means other than using L1 to clarify

their intentions and vent their frustration. For instance, Teachers KY and DL do not consistently use L1 in situations of intense anger and annoyance. Yet, if learners resist their authority, they abandon English and resort to Arabic. In one situation, Teacher DL expressed anger in English due to noise in one of her classes. However, moments later, feeling increasingly exasperated, she switched to Arabic shouting, “غلبت وأنا نقلكم نقصو الفوضى”

• **Reproaching students for not possessing prior knowledge**

Observations have uncovered instances where teachers utilize L1 to express disapproval when learners lack the necessary prior knowledge for a lesson. Teacher LG, for example, showed her students a picture of the main characters of “Alice in the Wonderland” during a warmup activity and asked them about the story’s name. With no student able to answer, she expressed her disappointment, exclaiming, “حتى الرسوم! المتحركة نسبتوها”. Similarly, teacher NA displayed a picture of the National Algerian Television Corporation. Students recognized the building’s name but when asked about its headquarters, they remained silent. Consequently, the teacher reproached them for their lack of the general knowledge saying, “هاذي ثقافة عامة، in Algiers”.

Interviews with the observed teachers unveiled that they unconsciously resort to L1 in emotional reactions especially when they frustrated or disappointed. Teacher BA reflected on this, remarking, “I’m keen on bringing pictures on my laptop to use them as a warmup or to support the content of the lesson. And then guess what happens? My kids (she means her students) do not have even the prior knowledge. At that time, I unconsciously blame them in Arabic. Believe me, I feel disappointed because they have neither a good command of English nor the general knowledge that helps to learn something in the lesson”.

In summary, the teachers’ use of L1 is multifaceted. It serves academic purposes such as explanation of new vocabulary, clarification of concepts and instructions, checking learners’ understanding of meaning of new forms and words, error correction and feedback, as well as cultural and contextual bridging. It is also employed for organizational and affective functions such as organizing and managing the class, redirecting learners towards the learning task at hand, reproaching students for not possessing prior knowledge, and expressing teachers’ frustration. This demonstrates a practical and nuanced use of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom.

The findings of current study align with many other studies, which highlight the use of L1 by EFL teachers for several purposes such as explaining new words and grammar rules as well as issuing and clarifying instructions (Al-Shidhani & Region, 2009; Kayaoglu 2012; Sali 2014). These studies collectively indicate the utility of L1, especially with non-advanced EFL learners. Compared with Qian, Tian & Wang’s study (2009), the current investigation shares similarities in the categorization of the functions of L1. Both studies identified academic and organizational functions. However, it is noted that the number of academic functions attributed to Arabic as L1 is fewer compared to those identified for Chinese as L1. This difference may be attributed to contextual factors, such as the prevalence of

crowded classrooms, which may necessitate Algerian EFL teachers to prioritize organizational tasks over academic ones.

5.2. Techniques of using L1 in EFL classes

The observations showed three different ways of using L1 by EFL teachers.

5.2.1. Pronouncing the first syllable of the Arabic word

This technique is primarily employed for academic functions, especially when explaining the meaning or new words or tapping into learners' prior knowledge. Teachers pronounce the first letter of the Arabic word or part of it hoping that the learners would guess the intended meaning. However, teachers do not resort to this alternative immediately upon their learners' inability to understand a word or phrase. Instead, they first use other alternatives, such as paraphrasing, mimicking, using synonyms and gestures. This method of using L1 is notably favored among "monolingual" teachers who typically refrain from L1 use in the EFL classroom. For instance, explaining the word "apology", Teacher KY gestured by patting herself on the chest. Despite this, the learners remained silent. Subsequently, she pronounced the first syllable of the Arabic word "إع" and the students continued "اعتذار". The surveyed teachers reported that they often employ alternative techniques to achieve their goals before resorting to L1. However, if these alternatives fail, Arabic becomes a more effective means as it is considered more direct and connected to the learners' experience.

5.2.2. Asking the learners to use L1

In certain cases, teachers explicitly prompt their students to utilize L1, particularly when they seek to confirm comprehension. Some teachers assert that if Arabic is allowed in the EFL classroom, it should be exclusively used by the learners. They perceive themselves as role models in using English, and they may only request learners to use L1 when absolutely necessary. For instance, Teacher RM mentioned that the teacher should not use Arabic; however, it is possible for students to use it. In one of her sessions, assessing students' grasp of the word "browser", she said, "in Arabic?". They replied, "متصفح". "But research engine is...?", she continued. They correctly answered, "محرك البحث".

5.2.3. Direct use of L1 by teachers themselves

Some teachers prefer to directly use of L1 for both academic and organizational purposes. They believe that its use in the former guarantees more compliance and, in the latter, saves time and facilitates learning, especially that that the content of the syllabus is challenging for the slow learners. Additionally, they think that direct use of L1 is inevitable since the learner internally uses it to talk to himself, process information, recall previous knowledge, and organize it in his mind. It is worth noting that the teachers observed and interviewed in this study exercise extreme caution when resorting to direct use of L1. They utilize it only when necessary to aid learning or manage the classroom. In this regard, the current study aligns with Al-Nofaie (2010) regarding cautious usage. The practice of the direct use of L1 detected in the present study is also congruent with Latsanyphone and Bouangeune (2009) in which teachers used a direct translation method and provided clear explanations in the mother tongue, which had a positive impact on word retention.

6. Conclusion

The present study has revealed that using L1 by the Algerian first-year secondary school EFL teachers is an unavoidable phenomenon. Contrary to the widespread belief that the mother tongue is never employed in foreign language instruction, all the teachers observed in the current study used it sparingly in response to the requirements of the context in which they taught. The academic functions detected in this study include elucidating unfamiliar vocabulary, clarifying complex ideas and instructions, verifying learners' grasp of new structures and vocabulary, correcting errors, and providing feedback, alongside facilitating cultural and contextual connections. Organizational functions, on the other hand, include overseeing classroom dynamics, guiding learners back to learning objectives, addressing instances where students lack prerequisite knowledge, and conveying frustration. This illustrates a pragmatic and intricate application of L1 in the EFL classroom. Furthermore, teachers' use of L1 in the current study is characterized by extreme caution. They mainly resorted to using alternative means or prompting learners to use it instead of them. In specific situations, they employed L1 directly.

The current study cannot claim the possibility of generalizing its results since it is qualitative in nature and limited to the case studied. Therefore, it may be beneficial to conduct other studies using quantitative methods to obtain data covering a broader sector of English language teachers. The current study could be a step towards that. Additionally, it did not address important aspects that could affect the use of L1 in EFL classes, such as the type of activity practiced, the level of learners, and the educational training level of the teachers. Addressing these variables in future studies will shed more light on the phenomenon investigated.

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