

Learners' First Language Functions in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract:

The argument over whether or not the learners' first language (L1) should be applied in English language as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms has been a contentious matter for a long time. This article aims to explore teachers' and students' perspectives and possible reasons for using L1 during the English language (L2) in Omani EFL contexts. In order to get the ultimate results of this study, a questionnaire was distributed among a group of 30 male and female teachers teaching English language in grade 11-12 schools in the Sultanate of Oman. The outcomes showed that both EFL teachers, throughout the lesson time, frequently used the L1 language for different teaching and managerial reasons. For example, participants believed that L1 is a helpful learning and teaching tool which facilitates learners' understanding of meanings of new vocabulary words; it helps in explaining difficult grammatical rules and in classroom management and discipline, and to motivate and encourage low proficiency level learners.

Keywords: first language, foreign language, EFL classroom

Introduction

The exclusion or inclusion of students' first language (L1) in EFL classrooms is a complex issue and it has been debated for a long time. Many teachers and students have different perspectives, and each group has their explanations and justifications. The main discussion about L1 use in teaching language happens between monolingual and bilingual supporters. Both sides have different assumptions towards L1 use in EFL classrooms. Keeping this controversy in mind, this article aims to shed light on teachers' perspectives of L1 language usage in the EFL classes, aiming to identify the ways in which students are being expected to learn English (L2) and the way teachers are teaching in grades 11-12 EFL classrooms in the Omani context.

Review of Literature

A number of studies have been carried out in various EFL contexts around the world, which have explored the roles and functions of L1 in L2 classrooms (e.g. Al-Nofie, 2010; Cameron, 2001; Cook, 2005; Nation, 2001; Song, 2009; Tang, 2002). There is a complete agreement between the educators about the benefits of using L1 language in the EFL classroom despite the presence of multiple studies that discuss the disadvantages of using L1 in an English classroom (Al-Ta'ani, 2019). Findings from these studies demonstrate that students' mother tongue has positive impact when used by both teachers and students in the EFL classroom. Further, researchers suggest that L1 language should be used by both students and teachers to aid the learning of L2.

The use of learners' L1 to aid the English learning played facilitative and supportive role even though English is considered to be the primary communication vehicle (Al-Ta'ani, 2019).

Despite the fact that some students stated that English language had been imposed on them and that it was an identity threat, and more so while teaching religious, cultural, and traditional issues, its use demonstrated high level of significance (Al-Ta'ani, 2019). In summary, there are a wide range of reasons for which students and teachers use L1 language in EFL classroom. For instance, L1 language has proved to be very helpful when it comes to explaining the most difficult political, cultural, traditional, and religious issues and concepts (Al-Ta'ani, 2019). The learners' first language also helped the students to feel less stressed and more comfortable and confident. L1 language was also important when expressing things that were somehow difficult to say in English. Other significances include and are not limited to providing weak learners with a chance of improving, comparing between various structures in English and L1, and offering instructions for exams and tasks (Al-Ta'ani, 2019).

In trying to explore the functions of L1 in EFL classroom, some recent researchers have suggested that learners' first language can be used to carry out multiple functions like checking grammatical concepts, explaining lexical functions, giving instructions, and checking for comprehension (Alrabah & et al., 2016). Therefore, instead of relying on English language for all these functions, L1 can be used alongside the foreign language. Other appropriate use of L1 in the EFL classroom includes testing, using translation and eliciting language. Other studies have suggested that L1 can be used to teach spelling, morphology and phonology, analyzing language, managing the classroom, keeping records and negotiating the syllabus. Furthermore, L1 can be used to contact individual students, maintaining discipline, organizing tasks, organizing the class, explaining grammar, and conveying and checking meanings of sentences and words (Alrabah & et al., 2016).

A majority of studies that have been conducted over the recent years have gone to the extent of exploring the factors behind the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. These researches have demonstrated that sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and affective factors have contributed greatly towards the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. However, EFL teachers are not always well-conversant about the factors that contribute towards the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. For instance, some studies have showed that some teachers might be conversant about the overall factors behind their decision to use L1 in EFL classroom, but others could only realize that after being taken through episodes of their teaching (Alrabah & et al., 2016). The bottom line of this is that there are multiple factors that can influence teachers to change their teaching decisions from the use of English to L1.

Minor differences were noticed in relation to the purposes and occasions under learners' first language should be used. Some of these differences were as a result of the level of proficiency of the students. According to Al-Ta'ani (2019), 54% of teachers and 72% of students think that it is important to use L1 language in the EFL classroom (Al-Ta'ani, 2019). A majority of the study participants challenging or difficult political, cultural, traditional, and religious concepts should be taught in the EFL classroom by referring to the learners' first language. A majority of instances where L1 language was used in the EFL classroom, learners appeared to respond notably higher compared to their educators (Al-Ta'ani, 2019) Large percentage of the students thought that using L1 language helped them develop better understanding of the difficult concepts and at the same time improve ideas including new vocabulary and grammatical rules more efficiently. When taking the low proficiency levels of EFL learners into consideration, the instructor's insistence on exclusively using English language can lead to

stressful classroom environment for the learners (Arabah & et al., 2016). The core role of L1 in the EFL classroom is to provide the basis for minimizing affective filters. Studies have indicated that for input of English language to be made more comprehensible, teachers can use L1 to attain a low affective filter for the learners and facilitating the acquisition of L2 (English). There are both affective and pedagogical factors that contribute towards the use of L1 in the EFL classroom.

The decision to use English language and L1 interchangeably is generally complex and based on a wide range of factors such as cognitive factors (Arabah & et al., 2016). When it comes to affective factors, educators responded to the contributions made by their students in a bid to create a learning environment that is free from stress. That means when teachers use L1 in the EFL classroom, they create a sense of relaxation amongst the students rather than utilizing English alone. Far from that, EFL teachers tend to use L1 to become more comprehensible to their learners in their attempts to simplify the L2 input. As such, the language that teachers address to language use of L1 is to try and ensure that they become more comprehensible (Arabah & et al., 2016). The deliberate process of the adult native speakers to try and simplify the complexity of their speeches to fit the level of the child-hearer is the same as multiple ways in which teachers try to simplify their talks so as to improve the proficiency of the students in the L2. In a language classroom, simplification of input could include having the instructors using L1 to try and accommodate the low proficiency levels of the students. For instance, the low English proficiency of students in the Omani context is the main reason why L1 is used in the EFL classroom (Arabah & et al., 2016). Experienced EFL teachers have intuitive feeling regarding the proficiency levels of their students. Hence, they usually try and adjust their input for English language accordingly in a bid to create room for the students to include the use of L1 in the teaching of EFL.

In EFL classrooms, teachers may resort to L1 for many pedagogical purposes, and Ferguson (2009) highlighted that occasional use of L1 served many teaching and learning functions related to pedagogical purpose and classroom management. In this regard, Sali (2014) surveyed the purposes of teachers' practice of L1 in three Turkish EFL classrooms using observations and interviews. The results showed three primary functions of L1 used by teachers: first, pedagogical purposes related to communicating the academic content; second, management purposes to set classroom proceedings and interactions efficiently; and finally, cultural or social purposes to build up a rapport. This matches Edstrom's (2006) study who stated that using L1 could be done in three main situations. First, L1 may apply to expressing feelings and building up relationships with learners. Second, using L1 may help learners to comprehend target cultures and to describe any connection between language and realities it presents. Finally, L1 use may be valuable in classroom management.

Learners' L2 proficiency levels seem to be one of the important reasons for EFL teachers' use of L1 as shown in some studies. For example, Macaro (2001) found that the most important variables in teachers' attitudes to L1 use is the ability of learners. He claimed that low proficient learners generally refuse the exclusive use of L1 in their EFL classrooms. For the less proficient learners, L1 was used to develop learners' metalinguistic awareness, to deal with learners, and to clarify the context content. This is in line with a study conducted by Pablo and et al (2011), who found that teachers believed that the frequency of their L1 practice varied according to the

learners` levels of proficiency. They claimed that at foundation levels L1 (Spanish) was needed more, while at higher levels less use of the L1 was required.

Al-Nofaie (2010) also examined teachers and learners` perspectives to applying the L1 language in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia. She concluded that EFL teachers and students had optimistic attitudes towards using L1 in EFL classrooms. Teachers tended to adopt the L1 language with beginners for giving examination instructions, translating new vocabulary, and clarifying grammar rules. Regarding learners' perspectives towards the use of L1 in their EFL classrooms, the consequences revealed that most were in favour of its use as it provided relax, although they believed that L1 use should be minimised and only used in particular class situations. Another common function of L1 use is to give instructions, and a number of research support using L1 in giving instructions for different purposes. For example, Cook (2005) indicated that using L1 in giving instructions is helpful. Similarly, a study conducted by Macaro (2001) revealed that L1 could be applied for “giving procedural instructions” (p. 69). Additionally, Cameron (2001) stated that some guidelines and instructions might be more complicated than activities, so using L1 is reasonable in such cases. Wharton (2007) indeed defined L1 as a “time-saving device” (p. 12). Similarly, Shimizu (2006) reported that “time-saving” is one of the principle arguments that researchers have identified about using L1 (p. 77).

Moreover, L1 is a useful tool to give feedback and clarify meanings. According to Bouangeune (2009), L1 use to give feedback to students supports understanding. When teachers are convinced that students have comprehended what is presented to them, they go on teaching. If teachers feel that comprehension has not happened, they will have to modify their teaching plans. Additionally, Cook (2008) argued that giving feedback in L1 was more real and more satisfactory to learners.

Methodology

Questionnaire analysis:

Why students tend to use their L1 in EFL classrooms in Oman:

A questionnaire was distributed among 30 EFL teachers teaching grades 11-12 in 8 schools in Oman in order to deeply explore and understand teachers` perspectives towards using L1 language as (L1) in their EFL classrooms. In a response to a question whether teachers believed in using the L1 language in their EFL classes or whether they supported the “English only” philosophy. Overall, 60% teachers supported and encouraged the use of L1 in EFL classrooms while 40% of teacher participants believed that L1 had no place in the EFL classrooms.

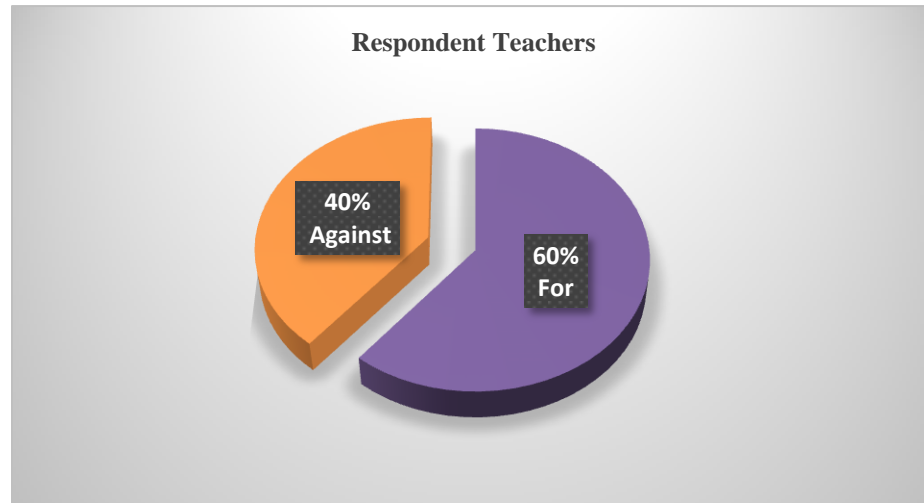


Figure 1.1: *Teachers' perspectives on whether L1 should be used in EFL classrooms or not (N=30)*

Those EFL teachers (60%) who reported that they used L1 in their EFL classrooms provided the following reasons:

- To explain some new abstract vocabularies.
- To avoid wasting time.
- To help low English proficiency learners understand tasks and activities (especially with more than one-step tasks).
- L1 was found helpful in situations where students want to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings but they cannot do so in English.
- To check comprehension.
- To explain new grammatical rules.
- Praising students for their good achievements
- Clarifying ambiguity of some activities/tasks, especially for weak achievers
- Introducing some abstract nouns
- Commenting on some students' answers and contributions to create an engaging classroom atmosphere
- Comparing L2 and L1 grammar rules (whenever needed)
- To raise important reminders or dates (e.g. examination schedules)
- To maintain classroom discipline
- To speak to troublemaker students.

L1 was found to play a significant part as a mediating instrument that facilitates the English language teaching and learning process, and as a scaffolding instrument that enhances learners to expand their L2 learning. Teacher participants agreed that L1 was very important to consider students' English language proficiency levels in relation to the usefulness of EFL teachers' use of L1. For instance, teachers used the L1 language to teach various activities such as explaining grammatical rules, introducing new vocabulary words, clarifying task instructions to facilitate understanding for learners, and classroom management. Teachers tended to talk to learners in L1 about attendance, exams, and to raise some personal issues.

Teacher participants generally thought that the L1 language could be applied in EFL classrooms for different functions. However, the teachers' questionnaire findings indicate that 60% of teachers selected 'Yes', in answer to the question: 'Should L1 be used in EFL classroom'? However, the majority of the teachers believed that using only English in EFL classrooms could help students to learn it much better, and they claimed that using the L1 language could simplify students' English learning practice and help students learn the English language much better. Similarly, teachers stated that the L1 language assisted learners to talk about their ideas easily. Moreover, EFL teachers claimed that the L1 language was useful in teaching and in clarifying difficult English language linguistic and grammatical rules. In addition, EFL teachers reported that they used the L1 language in many pedagogical practices such as explaining some new abstract vocabulary words, checking learners' comprehension, ensuring class discipline and management, teaching the two languages' tenses, and praising students for their outstanding achievements.

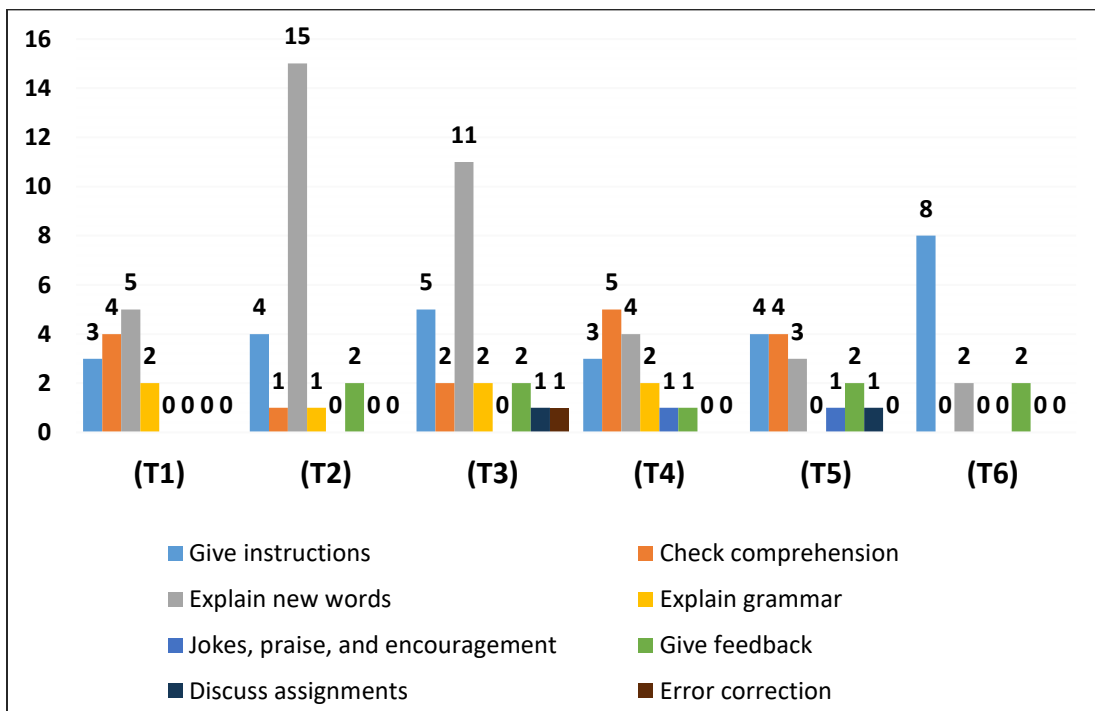


Figure 1.2: Functions of teachers' use of the learners' L1 in EFL classroom

The data analysis also showed that teachers used learners' L1 for socializing functions, repetitive functions, and classroom management. It might be debated that when looking at the teachers' L1 purposes, these purposes may directly or indirectly help achieving the pedagogical aims; from those that seems to directly serve pedagogical functions (e.g. repetitive), to most of what could be seen as social functions (e.g. greetings), as well as classroom management purposes. EFL Teachers, for example, may use L1 for social functions to create a friendly atmosphere to gradually engage his/her learners into classroom activities.

Learners in Oman context should preferably have studied English for more than 12 years before university level, many of them still could not use the L2 properly, and this may play a role in their greater use of L1 in L2 classes. This supports what has been recommended in the

literature review, as there seems to be a correlation between learners' proficiency in L2 and the type and amount of L1 being used. Therefore, it can be said that learners in a context where they and their teachers share the same L1, might be an expected setting where the translation is common among learners.

This study's findings show that EFL teachers believed that learners' L1 utilisation in their classrooms had many pedagogical benefits. The reasons for why EFL teachers use L1 can be outlined as follows:

- to explain some new abstract vocabularies and new grammatical rules;
- to save time;
- to help low English proficiency learners understand tasks and activities (especially with more than one-step tasks);
- in situations where students want to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings when they cannot do so in English;
- to check learners' comprehension;
- to praise students for their excellent achievements;
- to compare English language and L1 language tense forms; and
- to raise important reminders or dates related to examinations and holidays.

Still, some of teacher participants generally preferred to exclusive use of English in the classroom except for some contextual learning practices for which they felt learners' L1 could be applied as a last option to make sure that learning had taken place. In their opinion, the L1 language should be used only when essential to aid English learning in a better way. However, there are a number of aspects that encouraged EFL teachers in Oman to resort to the L1 language while teaching. The results show that the level of learners and trying to apply a communicative learning context were the main factors that influenced teachers and learners to occasionally use the L1 language.

In their responses to the question of 'whether L1 language is significant in English language classrooms', data findings of the teacher participants' responses showed that 40% of EFL teacher participants held negative perceptions towards using the L1 language. According to these teachers, using L1 could restrain learners from learning English in their classrooms, and they reported the following reasons for this:

- 'Only English' method should be used in EFL classrooms to expose students to more English language practices;
- learners might be lazy and would not try to learn English if L1 was utilised; and
- learners may find it easier to use L1 and never try to improve their English.
- Using the context to understand the task without translation.
- Encouraging students to only think and response in English.

Conclusion

This study's results show that both teachers and students had positive perspectives towards using L1 in EFL classrooms in Oman. Teachers and learners tended to use L1 regularly in their EFL classes as a simplifying instrument for diverse and instructional purposes, including methodological and social purposes. The EFL teachers used L1 as a teaching and a managerial classroom tool. For example, they used L1 was found useful in clarifying teachers' instructions and describing the aims of the lessons and activities, interpreting difficult points, giving commands, increasing the learners' understanding levels, and facilitating the L2 learning process in general. EFL teachers specified that the translation of some words and complex ideas was a good way to learn L2 and recommended that without using learners' L1, learners would be likely to misunderstand some important tasks and might have difficulties with their L2 learning progress.

Suggestions and Recommendations

This study has explored teachers' and learners' perspectives on using learners' first language in EFL classrooms in Oman. This study has aimed to pave the way for more research to investigate this issue. According to the findings, one of the reasons of adopting L1 is because both EFL teachers and learners share the same L1 which can be used for various reasons in L2 classrooms. Therefore, in order to understand the practice of using L1 in L2 classrooms, further research could shed light on the use of learners' L1 by teachers who speak a different language in both public and private schools. Exploring L1 functions and roles in these EFL different contexts would be useful.

About the Author

Dr Khalifa Mohammed Al Khamisi is a full-time lecturer and acting director of the Center of Foundation Studies at University of Buraimi - Oman. He holds a PhD in applied linguistics - teaching English (TESOL) from the University Southern Queensland- Australia and he also got his MA in TESOL form University of Southern Australia-Australia. He is also a part time language trainer (intensive and general English language course and IELTS) licensed from the Ministry of Manpower-Oman. He is a member in TESOL Oman. He had different positions: English supervisor, head of private schools' section, and IT director assistant in Oman. His research interest is adult learning, linguistics and classroom discourse context.

Questionnaire:

Dear Teacher:

This questionnaire aims at finding out your perceptions about using learner' first language in your English language classrooms. Your answers will be used only for research commitments. Please reflect on your own experience and perceptions by completing this questionnaire. Thank you for your cooperation

Part one: Participants' Background Information:

Please answer the following questions

A. Gender: Male ----- Female -----

B. Nationality -----

C. Teaching Experience (years): Please circle the most appropriate answer

- 1. 1-5 2. 6-10 3. 11-15 4. 16-20 5. more than 20

D. Governorate: Please circle the most appropriate answer

- 1. Muscat 2. Al Dhaharah 3. Al Sharqiah North 4. AlDakhliya

Part 2: What do you think of using learners' first language (L1) in EFL classrooms in Oman?

2.1 Should L1 be used in English language classrooms? Why? -----

2.2 Do you ever use L1 while you are teaching English? Why? -----

2.3 Do you encourage the use of L1 in your English language teaching practices? Why? -----

2.4 Would you please list/describe the activities/situations in which you think using L1 can be helpful in your English classrooms teaching?-----

Part 3: Participants' perceptions

Would you please indicate your perceptions by simply giving marks from 5 to 1. If you strongly agree with the statement please tick (☐) 5 and, if you strongly disagree please tick (☐) 1.

1= Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= Not sure 4= Agree 5= Strongly agree

**3.1
To
what**

**extend do teachers and students preserve L1 should be used in the EFL
classrooms in Oman?**

	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1	Students' L1 should be used in English language classrooms in Oman					
2	Using students' L1 can simplify students' English learning practice					
3	Using only English in EFL classrooms can help students to learn it much better					

4	Using students' L1 in English classrooms could save time					
5	Using students' L1 is significant in English language classrooms in Oman					
6	Using students' L1 in the primary stages of learning English language is very effective					
7	Using students' L1 helps learner to express his/her own ideas easily					

3.2 What are the specific pedagogical situations/contexts in which EFL teachers choose to use L1 while teaching English in Oman?

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
8	Students' L1 is essential in English classroom to present and clarify new word vocabularies					
9	Effective English language learning is grounded on using merely English language in the EFL classrooms					
10	Teachers who use students' L1 can better support and encourage learners to be involved in the classroom activities					
11	Students' L1 is a helpful tool to know about students' background and interests					
12	It is better to use L1 to check learners' understanding					
13	It is very useful when teachers use L1 for clarifying some English language problematic linguistic or grammatical rubrics					

3.3 What are the contexts in which students tend to use L1 in their EFL classrooms in Oman?

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
14	Students benefit from teacher's feedback if L1 is used					
15	Students usually participate more effectively in the English language classrooms when teacher uses L1 during the EFL class activities					
16	English language learners get motivated when L1 is used in the classroom					

Thank You

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