

19 Teachers' Beliefs about Using Arabic in the English Classroom

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1 INTRODUCTION

My experience of visiting English classrooms in Oman suggests that a wide range of practices exist regarding the use of the L1, which in this case is Arabic. In some classrooms Arabic is widely used while in others teachers keep it to a minimum. There have been a few studies in Oman in recent years to investigate how teachers of English use Arabic and why, and the purpose of this study is to add to this research by investigating the practices and beliefs of teachers of English in my region.

2 THE L1 IN L2 LEARNING

“To use or not to use the mother tongue?” – this has been one of the greatest dilemmas in the foreign language class for nearly a century” (Medgyes, 1999:62). The literature reflects the uncertainties which surround this issue and various positions have been argued for. Nation (2003), for example, thinks that the first language can play an important role in conveying meaning in L2 teaching, although learners should be exposed to the L2 as much as possible. Jin (2003) argues that research shows that the mother tongue can play an essential role in L2 learning. Van Patten (2003) states that when behaviourism was the theory that underpinned language teaching methodologies the use of the L1 was seen as a problem in L2 teaching. More recently, though, he notes, attitudes to L1 use in L2 learning have become more positive, with the L1 being seen as a resource which can support L2 learning. Prodromou (2000) also expresses positive views about the contribution to L2 learning that the L1 can make. McCann (2005) suggests that translation can be used to clarify language structures. Moreover, Cameron (2001) points to a range of ways that the L1 might be used in young learner classrooms, such as for translating words and sentences, giving feedback, discipline, informal talk, and talking about language.

Three studies conducted in Oman should also be noted here. Al-Hinai (2006) found that Arabic was widely used in the English classes he studied and the main reason teachers gave for this was learners' low level of proficiency in English. Al-Alawi (2008) reported a more varied picture, with two of the teachers in his study using the L1 frequently and another two avoiding it altogether. Overall, the teachers in this study felt that using the L1 had some benefits. Al-Hadrami (2008) reported varying degrees of Arabic use in the work of four teachers of English; all the teachers agreed that the L1 can be useful, particularly for explaining vocabulary and concepts, but three out of the four were also opposed to the excessive use of Arabic. All of the above studies were based on classroom observations and interviews. These three studies also highlight various other relevant papers which inform debates about the use of the L1 (e.g. Atkinson, 1987; Cole, 1999; Gill, 2005, Harbord, 1992; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002; Turnbull, 2001).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the beliefs of English teachers in Sharqiya North about using Arabic in the English classroom?
2. How often do English teachers say they use Arabic in their classes?
3. According to the teachers who say they use Arabic, for what reasons do they do so?
4. To what extent do the teachers feel that their learners use Arabic in English lessons?
5. What are the learners' views about the use of Arabic in English lessons, according to the teachers?

3.2 Context and Participants

My research took place in the Sharqiya North region of Oman. Using cluster sampling (see Bryman, 2008) I randomly selected 42 schools from a total of 84 in my region, then sent questionnaires to all the teachers of English in those schools. I sent out 205 questionnaires and 150 were returned, a response rate of just over 73%.

The respondents' profile was as follows. In terms of school type, 8.7% taught in General schools, 52% in Basic schools and 39.3% in schools where both Basic and General education curricula were taught. In terms of experience of teaching English, 38% had 1-5 years, 25.3% 6-10 and 36% more than 10 years. The teachers were also asked about the grades they taught and these covered the full range from Grade 1 to Grade 12 (several teachers taught more than one grade). Grade 9 was taught by 33% of the respondents, followed by Grade 8 with 31%. Grade 11 was that least widely taught, by 21% of respondents. On the basis of this profile we can conclude that this sample of teachers was quite diverse, covering many different grades, different school types, and degrees of experience.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The study utilized a survey approach and data were collected via a questionnaire. The content of the questionnaire was influenced by my experience of English teachers and classrooms in Oman as well as by the literature referred to earlier. In designing the instrument I also consulted the relevant methodological literature for advice on making the questionnaire more effective (see, for example, Bryman, 2008). The questionnaire was piloted with seven teachers and revised on the basis of the feedback and results that I received through this process.

The questionnaire had five sections. The first elicited background information, while the second asked teachers for their opinions on a number of statements about the use of the L1 in teaching English. The third section focused on the teachers' use of Arabic in the classroom while section four asked about learners' L1 use. The final part of the questionnaire elicited teachers' views on how their learners feel about the use of the L1.

The data were analyzed using a software package called SPSS. Munn & Drever (2004) suggest that simple questionnaire analysis can be conducted without the support of computers, but others such as Dörnyei (2003) do recommend the use of statistical packages, and I would agree with the latter view. Closed questionnaire items were converted into numbers and transferred into SPSS, which was then used to calculate descriptive statistics and to produce the tables and graphs presented below.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Beliefs about L1 Use

In Part 2 of the questionnaire the teachers were asked to give their opinions on 11 statements about using Arabic in English language classrooms. A five-point Likert scale of agreement was used and the results are presented in Table 1 below, collapsed into three categories and in descending order according to percentage of teachers agreeing with each.

As the table shows, three statements received high levels of agreement. Over 90% of respondents agreed that English should be spoken as much as possible by teachers and learners during English lessons; over 85% believed that Arabic should be minimized with older learners, while just over 80% felt that the use of the L1 was not compatible with a communicative approach to teaching English. At the lower end of the table, only just over 29% agreed that learners should be allowed to use their L1, while a little more than 35% felt that teachers' use of Arabic was associated with a lack of confidence in their own knowledge of English. Also, 40% agreed that teachers should be allowed to use the L1.

4.2 Teachers' Use of Arabic

Teachers were asked how frequently they used Arabic in lessons. Just over 51% said they did 'sometimes', while 34% said they did 'rarely'. 4.7% said they never used Arabic, while a total of 10% said they did often or very often.

Table 1: Teachers' beliefs about the use of the L1

Statements	Agree	Unsure	Disagree
Teachers and learners should speak English as much as possible in English lessons	92.0	1.3	6.7
With older learners teachers should keep the use of Arabic to a minimum	85.3	5.3	9.3
In a communicative approach to English teaching, teachers should not use Arabic	80.7	11.3	8.0
Learners prefer a teacher who knows their mother tongue	68.0	13.3	18.7
The use of Arabic by learners has a negative effect on learning of English	64.7	8.0	27.3
Learning English is improved when the teacher knows the learners' mother tongue	58.0	16.0	26.0
The use of Arabic by the teacher has a negative effect on learning of English	57.3	15.3	27.3
Using Arabic is necessary with younger learners of English	55.3	12.0	32.7
The teacher should be allowed to use Arabic	40.0	12.7	47.3
Teachers use Arabic when they lack confidence in their own knowledge of English	35.3	14.0	50.7
The learners should be allowed to use their mother tongue	29.3	18.7	52.0

Teachers who said they used Arabic sometimes, often or very often were then asked to indicate the reasons for which they did so. Table 2 summarizes the results for this question by showing the frequency with which each reason was selected.

Table 2: Teachers' reasons for using the L1

Reasons	Frequency
Clarifying abstract ideas	67
Explaining new words	57
Explaining grammar	56
Explaining differences in the use of L1 and L2 rules	52
Informal, friendly talk with pupils	45
Translating words or sentences	42
Discipline and class control	39
Introducing new topics	30
Giving instructions	29
Attendance taking	27
Checking understanding	26
Correcting learners' spoken errors	25
Focusing learners' attention	24
Testing	22
Eliciting language	13

As this table shows, according to these teachers the three most common reasons for using Arabic were clarifying abstract ideas, explaining new words, and explaining grammar.

4.3 How Learners Use Arabic

Part 4 of the questionnaire asked teachers who allowed their learners to use Arabic to specify when they allowed them to do so. Table 3 presents the results for this question.

Table 3: Reasons for learners' L1 use

Reasons	Frequency
Translating an L2 word into L1 to show they understand it	83
Asking 'how do we say X in English?'	73
Asking questions about grammar	70
Translating a text from L2 to L1 to show they understand it	33
Talking in pairs and groups	24
Translating as a test	24
Answering the teacher's questions about grammar	24

The most common reason for learners' use of the L1, according to these results, was translating an English word into Arabic to show their understanding of it. Asking how to say something in English was also a common reason for learners' use of the L1, as was asking questions about grammar.

4.4 Learners' Views about Using Arabic

The final questionnaire item asked the teachers how they think their learners feel about the use of the L1. Table 4 summarizes their responses.

Table 4: Learners' views about L1 use, according to teachers

Response	%
I do not know how my students feel about this issue	12.4
They want the teacher to use Arabic all the time	8.3
They want the teacher to use Arabic as much as possible	20.7
They want a balance of Arabic and English	20.0
They want the teacher to use Arabic as little as possible	26.9
They want the teacher to use English all the time	11.7

This table shows a spread of responses, with the most common (26.9%) being 'they want the teacher to use Arabic as little as possible'. At the same time, though, 20.7% said they believed their learners want the teacher to use Arabic as much as possible. Only 11.7% of the teachers felt their learners wanted them to use English all the time.

5 DISCUSSION

Teachers' responses in this study indicated that they had positive views about maximizing the use of English in their teaching. Over 90% agreed (as Turnbull, 2001 suggests) that teachers and learners should speak the L2 as much as possible in English lessons while less than 30% felt that learners should be allowed to use their L1 (a position, however, for which there is also support today – e.g. Atkinson, 1987). The vast majority even believed that using the L1 was not compatible with a communicative approach to language teaching (this is a debateable point).

Despite these views, though, the teachers also felt that the use of the L1 did have a role to play, for example, in teaching young learners; the teachers also generally agreed that learners preferred a teacher who spoke their L1. In reporting their practices, only 34% said they use Arabic rarely, which perhaps suggests that Arabic was more widely used than teachers' earlier questionnaire responses suggest (such tensions between what teachers report in questionnaires and what they do in the classroom are not unusual).

A wide range of reasons for which teachers used Arabic in English lessons was identified; the most commonly cited related to explaining ideas, vocabulary and grammar. These findings reflect those in Al-Hadrami (2006), who also found that explaining grammar, vocabulary and concepts were the main reasons why the L1 was used by Omani teachers of English.

Teachers were also asked how their learners feel about the use of Arabic in English lessons. No clear conclusions can be reached here as while over 25% said learners want teachers to use Arabic as little as possible, almost 21% said the opposite – that learners want teachers to use Arabic as much as possible. It would be interesting to explore how teachers reach conclusions about what their learners prefer and what impact on teachers' practices their views about their learners' preferences have. In terms of why learners use Arabic, the two most common reasons according to the teachers were to translate English words into Arabic to show they understand them and asking for help in saying something they do not know how to say in English.

5.1 Limitations

This study raises a number of interesting issues but certain limitations must be acknowledged. Questionnaires allow the study of broad patterns without providing in-depth understanding; for this reason, the thinking behind many of the answers the teachers gave here could not be explored. Also, while asking teachers what their learners feel is interesting, a parallel analysis of learners' actual opinions would have been valuable here. The specific nature of the context studied must also be kept in mind; teachers in other parts of Oman may not necessarily have the same views as the group studied here.

6 CONCLUSION

Overall, the picture which emerges here suggests possible tensions between what teachers of English feel is desirable in practice vis-à-vis L1 use, what their learners prefer, and what happens in the classroom. Teachers may feel that L1 use and communicative language teaching are at odds with one another (this is not necessarily the case) and believe that 'modern' instructional practices minimize L1 use. At the same time, though, they may be faced with learners who expect some L1 use, and the result may be that the degree to which Arabic is used in English classes is more than these questionnaire results suggest. For this reason research of this kind needs to be supplemented with observation and interviews so that we can obtain a clearer understanding not only of what teachers believe but also of what they do and why.

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