

2 The Use of the L1 in the Elementary English Language Classroom

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1 INTRODUCTION

The mother tongue is often seen as a negative feature of the L2 classroom, and decisions about whether to use the L1 are amongst the most common dilemmas that language teachers in monolingual classrooms face. In this study I investigate the use of Arabic in the elementary English language classroom in Oman.

2 BACKGROUND

Several years ago an inspector visiting my class seemed very unhappy that I used Arabic to help one of my learners understand how to do a task. Since then I have continued to think about the use of Arabic in my work. My experience suggests that the L1 can make a positive contribution to L2 learning. Increasingly, there is also support for such a view in the literature. All of these factors provided the motivation for this study.

3 THE L1 IN L2 LEARNING

The main arguments against using the L1 have been that it does not encourage learners to use the L2 and that when the teacher uses the L1 it deprives the learners of input in the L2. (Krashen 1988, in Prodromou 2002; Ellis 1984, in Hawks 2001).

However, several benefits of using the L1 have also been proposed:

- it reduces learner anxiety (Auerbach 1993 in Hawks 2001) and creates a more relaxing learning environment (Burden 2000; Philips: 1993);
- it is a means of bringing the learner's cultural background knowledge into the class (Prodromou 2002);
- it facilitates checking understanding and giving instructions (Atkinson 1987).
- it facilitates the task of explaining the meaning of abstract words and of introducing the main differences in grammar and pronunciation between L1 and L2 (Buckmaster 2000; Cole 1998).

Proponents of L1 use, though, are also keen to point out that "mother tongue use should be selective and not seen as just an easy option" (Hawks 2001: Section 3: Para 2). The key for the teacher seems to be using the L1 appropriately and avoiding the over-use which will make learners feel that they cannot understand the input of the target language until it is translated into their L1 (Atkinson 1987).

4 METHOD

4.1 Research Questions

This study investigated the following questions:

1. What are the purposes of using Arabic in the English classes?
2. How can Arabic be used more effectively to support the learning of English?
3. What do the learners think about the use of Arabic?
4. What are the factors that might determine the use of Arabic in elementary classes?

4.2 Data Collection

Data were collected in my own elementary classroom and in those of three colleagues teaching elementary classes in my school. The methods of data collection are discussed below.

4.2.1 *Lesson recording*

Two complete lessons of my own with Grade 6 were audio recorded and analysed to identify the purposes for which the L1 was used. On the basis of my reading and of the analysis of these lessons I developed an observation schedule on which information about the use of the L1 could be recorded. An example of this is given in Appendix 1.

4.2.2 *Classroom observation*

This schedule was used to analyse three lessons which I observed and tape-recorded in the classrooms of three colleagues teaching elementary classes (Grades 4 and 5) in my school.

4.2.3 *Interviews – Teachers*

These same teachers were interviewed. The interviews were structured and each teacher was asked the following questions:

1. When do you think the use of Arabic in teaching English is helpful?
2. What factors influence your decisions to use Arabic in teaching English?
3. Do you think the use of Arabic in teaching English has any drawbacks?
4. Do you think the use of Arabic in teaching English in elementary classrooms can help pupils learn better?

The interviews were also tape-recorded.

4.2.4 *Interviews – Learners*

I also interviewed two separate groups of sixteen learners each. Before I started the discussion I told the learners about the purpose of the interview

and gave them five minutes to brainstorm ideas about the topic. We then had an open discussion about the use of Arabic in English lessons. I made notes of the points which were raised during the discussion.

5 FINDINGS

In considering the findings from this study, we must be mindful that only male teachers and learners, participated, that only one lesson by each of my colleagues was analysed, and that all those involved came from one school.

5.1 Use of L1 in My Teaching

Table 1 summarises the purposes and frequency of L1 use in two lessons from my own teaching.

Table 1: Use of Arabic in my lessons

Purposes of using L1	Lesson		
	A	B	Total (A+B)
Setting a situation or giving a purpose	3	2	5
Explaining exercises in the book	6	3	9
Checking understanding	4	0	4
Translating English words, phrases, questions & instructions	12	11	23
Explaining meaning of abstract vocabulary	0	1	1
Explaining rules of grammar, pronunciation & spelling	1	7	8
Eliciting Arabic equivalents of English	8	5	13
Organizing classroom settings	0	0	0
Class management and control	11	4	15
Discussing classroom events	2	0	2
Praising	0	2	2
Telling jokes/anecdotes	0	0	0
Total	47	35	82

82 separate instances of Arabic use were identified, 47 in the first lesson and 35 in the second. The most frequent use of Arabic was for translating words, phrases, and instructions. Arabic was also used on 15 occasions for classroom management, but no examples of L1 use for organizing classroom settings or telling jokes were identified.

5.2 Classroom Observation

Table 2 summarises the purposes and frequency of L1 use in the lessons taught by three colleagues.

Table 2: Use of Arabic in colleagues' lessons

Purposes of using L1	Teachers			Total A+B+C
	A	B	C	
Setting a situation or giving a purpose	3	7	3	13
Explaining exercises in the book	2	4	2	8
Checking understanding	4	5	2	11
Translating English words, phrases, questions & instructions	9	5	5	19
Explaining meaning of abstract vocabulary	0	0	0	0
Explaining rules of grammar, pronunciation & spelling	0	4	6	10
Eliciting Arabic equivalents of English	1	0	1	2
Organizing classroom settings	0	0	0	0
Class management and control	9	7	2	18
Discussing classroom events	0	0	0	0
Praising	2	3	0	5
Telling jokes/anecdotes	2	0	4	6
Total	32	35	25	92

From the above table we can notice that Arabic was used 92 times by the three teachers. It was most frequently used by teacher B (35 times) and least frequently used by teacher C (25 times). Overall, translation was once again the most common purpose for L1 use, followed by classroom management and control. Surprisingly perhaps, Arabic was never used to explain abstract vocabulary.

5.3 Teachers' Interviews

The three teachers interviewed suggested that the main reasons for using L1 in their work are explaining meaning of abstract words (given the data in Table 2, it seems that the teachers refrained from using this strategy while I was observing them), restating English words or phrases (especially instructions) and class control. Two of the teachers also said that using Arabic for translation and explaining the meaning of concrete words is only acceptable when using English and gesture do not succeed.

In terms of factors which affect decisions about the use of Arabic in English lessons, the teachers referred to similar issues: class size, the level of the learners, time constraints, and the type of classroom activity.

The teachers also agreed that the L1 can have a negative effect if it is not used appropriately. In particular, they agreed that excessive use of Arabic would make learners dependent on it when learning English. They did not offer specific comments on how the L1 might support learning, but emphasised the point that Arabic should only be used when it is really necessary and that teachers should make every attempt to minimise it.

5.4 Learners' interviews

Learners were asked when they find the teacher's use of Arabic helpful. Most responses seemed to revolve around using Arabic for translation. In justifying this answer, one learner said that it was necessary to reinforce the understanding of words so that learners could remember them next time without them being translated again. Another learner said that some learners might misunderstand what the teachers says, therefore translating what has been said in English is a way of making sure that the learners get the right message. At the same time learners were also aware that too much use of the L1 was not a good thing.

Learners also commented on the importance for them of having a teacher who spoke their mother tongue, and highlighted problems which would arise if this were not the case. In particular, they felt that

- they would not be able to understand difficult or abstract words since the teacher would not be able to explain them in Arabic.
- only the learners who have a high level of language proficiency would benefit from the teacher by communicating efficiently with them in English.
- the absence of the L1 might cause some problems of discipline because the teacher cannot stop the noise by using English only.

6 DISCUSSION

The data indicate that Arabic was widely used both in my own lessons as well as in those of my colleagues. The reasons for this, in all cases, relate closely to teachers' perceptions of the context in which they work; they accept that minimising the use of Arabic is a goal to strive for, but also feel that learners' low levels of proficiency make the use of Arabic necessary at times. This reflects what Atkinson (1987) and Cole (1998) say about the influence of learners' level on the use of the L1 by teachers. The classroom data suggest that the main purpose for which Arabic is used in this study was to translate words and instructions. The interviews with the teachers suggest that translation of this kind provides a short cut and that this is attractive given the time pressures under which teachers work. This suggests that if teachers felt less pressure of this kind they might use the L1 less frequently.

Arabic was also widely used for class management and control. Arabic seems to be, according to the teachers involved in this study, more effective for dealing with discipline problems than English.

Learners were also aware of the disadvantages of too much L1 in the English classroom. They also felt strongly, however, that they will learn English more effectively when the teacher is able to speak their mother tongue and gave a number of reasons for their belief.

7 CONCLUSION

This study suggests a tension between beliefs about what is ideal (i.e. minimal use of the L1) and what actually happens in the classroom, a tension which both teachers and learners explain with reference to contextual factors and to their views about effective language teaching and learning. Without dismissing the impact of context on teachers' work, I would suggest that it is often easy to explain classroom practice in this way without examining circumstances more thoroughly. I think that one point that emerges here, for myself and the teachers in this study, is that we need to consider our use of L1 more closely, to review our justifications for this, to question whether the role of L1 in our classrooms is one that supports learning or not, and to consider alternatives where necessary.

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Appendix 1
Lesson Analysis Sheet

Class: 6/1

Date: 16/04/2002

Period: 6

Class size: 40

Activity type: Listening

Classroom setting: Normal

Purposes of using L1	Example of L1 discourse (Translated into English)	No. of times
Setting a situation or giving a purpose	<i>Toddy boys we are going to listen for eight children</i>	3
Explaining exercises in the book	<i>You should only circle the words that you hear</i>	6
Checking understanding	<i>What is the difference between a 'village' and a 'town' ?</i>	4
Translating or restating English words, phrases, questions and instructions	<i>It is near the sea</i>	12
Explaining meaning of abstract vocabulary		0
Explaining rules of grammar, spelling, handwriting and pronunciation	<i>Remember we never add 's' after singular nouns</i>	1
Eliciting L1 equivalents of L2	<i>What does the word 'day' mean?</i>	8
Class management and control	<i>You at the back, stop talking</i>	11
Discussing classroom events	<i>This might have this exercise in the exam</i>	2
Organizing classroom settings		0
Telling jokes/anecdotes		0
Praising		0