

3 The Role of The L1 in Grade 5 EFL Classrooms

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1 INTRODUCTION

The use of the mother tongue (L1) in foreign and second language (L2) classrooms is an on-going issue of debate. Teachers who share their learners' L1 are often unsure about whether using this in the classroom helps or hinders L2 learning. My own view is that while L2 teachers should maximize the use of the target language in their classrooms, there is a need to use the L1 on certain occasions. Inspired by the differing views on this issue in the literature and driven by my own interest in the subject, I decided to investigate the use of the L1 in Grade 5 English classes in Oman. In this context, teachers have traditionally been discouraged from using the L1 in teaching English; the new Basic Education curriculum, though, suggests that at times Arabic can be productively used. This may reflect changing views about the role which the L1 can play in the teaching of English in Oman.

2 L1 USE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 Opinions about L1 Use

Cook (2001) cited in Gill (2005: 1) describes the use of the L1 in L2 teaching as "a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over a hundred years...however the assumption is phrased, the L2 is seen as positive, the L1 as negative ... recent methods do not so much forbid the L1 as ignore its existence ...". When communicative language teaching became popular, L2 input and use were seen to be the key to L2 learning; it was, thus, believed that the L1 was a negative feature of L2 learning and that it should be avoided (e.g. Krashen, 1981 in Tang, 2002).

However, attitudes towards the L1 have in recent years become more positive, with a number of authors arguing that it can play a role in L2 learning (e.g. Atkinson, 1987; Deller, 2003; Harbord, 1992; Cameron, 2001). There have also been classroom studies which demonstrate how the L1 is used and which report that L2

teachers' and learners' attitudes towards the L1 are positive (e.g. Prodromou, 2000; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002). For example, Schweers (1999), in a study of Spanish-speaking learners of English, found that over 88% of the participants in the study felt that Spanish should be used during English classes.

2.2 Reasons for Using the L1

Those who support L1 use, though, do not suggest that it should be used all the time, but that it can be helpful for certain purposes. Atkinson (1987), Auerbach (1993), cited in Schweers (1999), and Cameron (2001), for example, list several different uses of the L1 in L2 classrooms: translating new words and abstract ideas, explaining complex grammar points, classroom management, giving instructions and checking learners' comprehension.

Cole (1999) states that abstract words or expressions which are difficult to explain in the L2 should be translated. However, Harbord (1992) warns that teachers should not use this strategy when one to one translation is not possible. He advises teachers to use an alternative L2 strategy wherever possible, such as visual prompts, miming and situational contexts. Explaining grammar is another common area where the L1 can be used. Based on my experience, I believe that it is not worth spending lesson time explaining grammatical structures such as the 'present perfect form' in English, particularly when equivalents in Arabic do not exist.

Regarding instructions, Atkinson (1987) states that low level learners often find it difficult to understand instructions given in the target language. Therefore, it is useful to give instructions in the L1 so that learners understand what the teacher is asking them to do. Gill (2005) supports the use of the L1 for classroom management. However, Nation (2003) suggests that classroom management in the L2 can be a source of meaningful L2 input for learners.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The overall research question for this study was: What role does teachers' use of the L1 (Arabic) play in Grade 5 Omani classrooms? I addressed this question by investigating the following sub-questions:

1. How frequently do teachers use the L1 in Grade 5?
2. For what purposes do they use the L1?
3. What effect does using the L1 have on L2 learning, according to the teachers?

3.2 Participants

Four Omani teachers of English from my school participated in this study. They all taught Grade 5 learners (11-12 years of age) and had over 10 years' experience of teaching English. They had taught English in the General Education system for at least seven years and at the time of this study had recently moved to the new Basic Education curriculum.

3.3 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through observations and interviews.

3.3.1 Observations

Observation allows behaviours to be recorded directly, as they occur. In my study, I obtained permission from the four selected teachers to observe them once each and to audio record these lessons. All lessons were 40 minutes long and came from the first unit of English For Me for Grade 5, which was about 'Food and Health'.

During my observation, I used a tally sheet to record how often and for what purpose the teachers used Arabic. The categories in the tally sheet reflected the five purposes for using the L1 discussed earlier: giving instructions, explaining grammar points, translating words and concepts, checking understanding and classroom management.

I was able to check the records I made during the observations by listening to the audio recordings of the lessons afterwards. This also allowed me to transcribe what teachers actually said.

3.3.2 Interviews

Brown & Rogers (2002) describe interviews as face-to-face data gathering using a question and answer format. In this study, I interviewed the four teachers directly after their lessons in order to understand their reasons for using the L1 and their beliefs about the use of Arabic in teaching English. The interviews were quite structured (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001) – I asked each teacher the same set of questions in the same order. To improve my skill as an interviewer, I practised interviewing some other teachers before I did the interviews for this study. There is an example of an interview in the Appendix.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Teacher 1

Table 1 summarizes the results of the observations for Teacher 1.

Table 1: Use of L1 by Teacher 1

Use of L1	Frequency
Giving instructions	5
Explaining grammar points	0
Translating words and concepts	1
Checking understanding	0
Classroom management	6
Total	12

The main aim of the lesson was to revise words related to food and drink. According to my tally sheet and confirmed by the audio recording, the teacher used Arabic 12 times. The two main reasons for using Arabic were giving instructions and classroom management. For instance, once he said 'give me an example' in Arabic; on another occasion he used Arabic to say 'keep quiet'. The L1 was used for translation only once (the item was 'apple juice'), while Arabic was not used to explain grammar rules or to check understanding.

In the interview, this teacher stated that it is important to use Arabic especially in teaching grammar or explaining difficult concepts. He believed that using Arabic 20%-30% of the time in a lesson was reasonable. He explained that he used Arabic because it saved time, especially when the lesson's focus is on grammar. He also said that "teaching grammar is boring ... but using some Arabic might make it interesting". He was aware that his use of Arabic might encourage learners not to use English.

4.2 Teacher 2

The main aim of Teacher 2's lesson was to enable learners to sort food and drink words into countable and uncountable nouns. Table 2 summarizes the results of the observations for this lesson.

Table 2: Use of L1 by Teacher 2

Use of L1	Frequency
Giving instructions	5
Explaining grammar points	10
Translating words and concepts	17
Checking understanding	13
Classroom management	5
Total	50

As this table shows, the teacher used Arabic frequently (most of all the teachers in this study in fact). The main reason Arabic was used here was to translate words and concepts, such as 'countable things'; it was also used quite often to explain grammar points and to check learners' understanding.

In the interview, the teacher said that Arabic needs to be used in most English lessons with Grade 5 learners because they will not understand the teacher if English is used all the time. He thought that Arabic should be used for about 60% of each lesson. He identified different reasons why Arabic can be used, such as translating concepts, introducing new words, explaining grammar and checking the learners' understanding. He said that he did not think that Arabic reduced the learners' exposure to English because it is used just to support their understanding of English.

4.3 Teacher 3

The main aim of Teacher 3's lesson was to practise the spelling of the plural of words ending in the letter 'o'. Table 3 summarizes the results of the observations for this lesson. This shows that Teacher 3 used Arabic 15 times, mostly to translate words and explain concepts.

Table 3: Use of L1 by Teacher 3

Use of L1	Frequency
Giving instructions	2
Explaining grammar points	4
Translating words and concepts	8
Checking understanding	1
Classroom management	0
Total	15

Sometimes he used long Arabic utterances to explain grammar points (e.g. when he explained the rule for using 's' or 'es' for the plurals of words ending in 'o'). The teacher never used Arabic for classroom management, and used Arabic only once to check the learners' understanding.

The teacher stated in the interview that Arabic should be used in English lessons, though he felt that this should be moderate (5% to 10% of the lesson). The teacher said that using too much Arabic does definitely reduce the learners' exposure to English. Referring to his lesson, he said that he used long Arabic utterances because he needed his learners to understand one of the complex rules in English, which was the use of 'es' or 's' in plural nouns. He believed that Arabic was the most effective way to explain that complicated grammar rule.

4.4 Teacher 4

Table 4 summarizes the results of the observations for Teacher 4. The main aims of the lesson were to revise healthy and unhealthy foods and to practise forming the plural of words related to food and drink.

Table 4: Use of L1 by Teacher 4

Use of L1	Frequency
Giving instructions	0
Explaining grammar points	5
Translating words and concepts	8
Checking understanding	2
Classroom management	1
Total	16

Translating words and concepts was the most common use of Arabic in this lesson (for example, the teacher translated ‘revise’ and ‘singular and plural’). The teacher never used Arabic to give instructions and he rarely used it to manage the classroom. The teacher usually used Arabic to explain grammar points (e.g. related to the use of singular and plural nouns).

In the interview he argued that teachers should minimize their use of Arabic (he recommended about 10% of each lesson), but also acknowledged that in some cases (e.g. to explain grammar) it is important to use Arabic, especially with low proficiency learners. Although the teacher used Arabic, he felt that it might have a negative effect on learning English. Thus, he said it should be the last resort.

5 DISCUSSION

The four teachers in this study used Arabic to differing degrees but all agreed that it should be used in English classrooms when necessary. Their interview comments pointed to a number of issues which teachers can consider in making decisions about using the L1, particularly learners’ age and proficiency in English.

Of 93 observed uses of the L1 in four lessons, 34 (36.6%) were for translating words and explaining concepts. This was the most common reason why Arabic was used. Explaining grammar (20.4%) and checking understanding (17.2%) were the second and third most common uses of the L1. These figures suggest that vocabulary, concepts and grammar are, according to the teachers in this study, those areas of learning English Grade 5 learners have most difficulty understanding. An example of how the L1 can be helpful came from the work of Teacher 3, who spent almost 10 minutes trying to explain the grammatical concept ‘pluralize’ using various L1 strategies; these failed, but a simple translation into Arabic allowed learners to understand and the teacher was able to proceed with the lesson.

Classroom management also involved some Arabic use, though one teacher did not use it all for this purpose, illustrating, as Nation (2003) suggests, that it is possible to manage the classroom using simple English words and structures.

From the interviews it was clear that three of the four teachers felt that excessive L1 use could be detrimental to L2 learning. Teacher 2 was the exception here; he used Arabic much more than the other teachers (almost 54% of the total L1 use

observed came from this teacher's lesson) and also stated that he did not think using the L1 frequently hindered the learning of English. In his lesson, though, learners had little exposure to English and, mirroring the teacher, they spoke out in Arabic rather than attempting to do so in English. I agree with Turnbull (2001) who believes that foreign language teachers should maximize the use of target language in their classes. Otherwise, learners will be deprived of valuable target language input (this is particularly true in Oman where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom).

6 CONCLUSION

Replicating studies of this kind with more teachers, and over time can provide further insight into teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to the use of the L1 in teaching English. Nonetheless, I feel that the findings from this small-scale study provide teachers of English in Oman with material they can use to think about their own practices and beliefs; teacher educators working for the Ministry of Education, too, can use some of the insights provided here to help teachers on courses think about the use of the L1 in teaching English. One final point to make here is that, as this study shows, further research into the use of the L1 can benefit from using not just observations but also interviews, as the latter provide insight into teachers' beliefs which observations alone cannot.

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APPENDIX : SAMPLE INTERVIEW

[R=Researcher; T=Teacher]

R: First of all, I want to ask is Arabic used in English lessons or not?

T: In general Arabic is used in different levels for teaching English language, in elementary or secondary in all the levels.

R: Do you think it is important or necessary to use Arabic in English lessons?

T: It is important to use it especially in teaching grammar or difficult concepts to make the pupils understand more.

R: What percentage do you think that Arabic should be used in English lessons?

T: This percentage depends on the lesson. But in general I think between 20 – 30 percent.

R: Ok, in what occasions can we use Arabic in English lessons?

T: Sometimes we need Arabic to teach English during teaching grammar. You know that some tenses we have in Arabic are similar in English. It is easier for the students to get this knowledge directly by translating sentences into Arabic. And also sometimes we find or face some difficult concepts which are not or which cannot be understood by pupils or by miming or using pictures or different ways such as the feeling words and abstract words.

R: Ok, so you believe it is used and you believe that it is necessary to be used in those occasions, but why do we have to use Arabic to explain concepts and explain grammar points?

T: Sometimes we need these ways of teaching or using Arabic to save time. The time is not enough to teach grammar. I need to use some Arabic to help the pupils to understand the grammar quickly. And also the ways of teaching grammar in that lesson couldn't help me to make my pupils understand and get the knowledge of that piece of language. So, the time will be saved and I am sure that my students understand the piece of grammar quickly.

R: Do you think that using Arabic stops the pupils to learn English? Or do you think that the exposure of Arabic stops the pupils to learn English?

T: Of course, using too much Arabic might make my pupils depend on the Arabic language more than English. So, they will ignore my English because they know that the teacher will translate it in Arabic. They wait for me to tell them in Arabic.

R: Yes, ok, in your previous lesson your usage of Arabic was limited and it was for translating words and explaining grammar points. Do you think that your Arabic explanation helped the pupils to learn English effectively?

T: As I said before that grammar and some concepts need to use Arabic, because the students couldn't get the translation related on that piece of grammar or to make the understanding to these concepts quickly or completely. So, I tried not to use Arabic but I felt that I need to use it in the lesson..... teaching grammar in general is boring because it is difficult for them to understand but using some Arabic might make it interesting.