

2 The L1 in Young Learner Classrooms: Teachers' Views and Practices

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1 INTRODUCTION

In my years as a teacher of English as a foreign language I have heard many different views about the use of the L1. I have heard teachers claim that the L1 supports learners' understanding. On the other hand, I have met teachers who believe that the use of the L1 should be avoided. I have also, in my role as a senior teacher, noticed that teachers' stated beliefs on this matter are not always reflected in their classroom practices. An interest in exploring this range of positions on the use of the L1 in teaching English motivated me to conduct this study.

2 L1 USE IN L2 LEARNING

2.1 Reasons for Using the L1

A number of reasons for using the L1 have been suggested in the literature (Cameron, 2001; Prodromou, 2000; Tang, 2002) . For example:

- explaining aspects of foreign language grammar
- translating vocabulary or sentences
- giving instructions
- checking understanding of concepts, talk, text or instructions
- eliciting language
- focusing learners' attention
- talking about learning
- giving feedback
- disciplining and class control
- informal, friendly talk with learners

I drew on these ideas in developing the instruments for this study (see below).

2.2 Teacher and Learner Attitudes to the L1

Tang (2002) studied the use of the L1 by Chinese teachers of English as well as their learners' attitudes towards it. The results showed that both teachers and learners responded positively to using the L1 as a supportive and facilitating teaching tool. Schweers (1999) investigated the attitudes towards using the L1 of teachers and learners in an EFL context where the L1 was Spanish. This study also showed that the majority of the teachers and learners agreed that the L1 should be used sometimes. Another survey was conducted by Prodromou (2000), with Greek learners of English. He found that most beginner and intermediate learners, but only a minority of advanced learners, felt the use of the L1 in the English classroom was acceptable. Finally, a study conducted by Qoura (2005) examined Saudi Arabian teachers' and learners' attitudes towards using Arabic in EFL classrooms. In line with earlier studies, the results showed that the majority of EFL teachers supported the use of the L1 in their classrooms, although the degree of support depended on the level of the learners. Overall, then, there is much evidence that teachers' and learners' attitudes to the use of the L1 in English lessons are positive.

2.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Using the L1

Much has also been written about the advantages and disadvantages of L1 use in L2 classrooms. For example, Auerbach (1993) and Bowen (2004) suggest that using the mother tongue makes learners feel secure, less stressed and affects their willingness to learn the foreign language. Furthermore, Deller (2003) argued that the L1 might motivate learners by helping them to enjoy materials which might otherwise be too challenging for them - for example, reading a new text that contains many unknown words. Finally, using the L1 might save the teacher time, as Viney (2005: 2) has pointed out: "where most students have deduced a word in a context and a couple haven't, a quick translation is a lot easier than resorting to board drawing, mime, monolingual dictionaries, paraphrase, definition or whatever".

The main arguments against using the L1 are that it reduces exposure to the L2 and may make learners reliant on teachers' translations. This will limit the development of their ability to use and understand the L2.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The aims of this study were to examine teachers' attitudes towards the use of the L1 in teaching English and to analyze the actual use of the L1 in English lessons. I addressed four specific research questions:

1. How often is the L1 used in English lessons?
2. For what purposes is the L1 used in these lessons?
3. Why, according to teachers, do they use the L1 in their teaching?
4. What factors influence teachers' decisions about using the L1?

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were Omani teachers of English to young learners in Basic Education schools. Six teachers were observed and interviewed. Their learners were between 6 and 10 years of age. Two of these teachers worked in my school while the other four worked in four different nearby schools. Additionally, 50 female teachers of English in Basic Education schools in three regions in Oman were sent a questionnaire about the use of the L1.

3.3 Data Collection

As indicated above, data were collected through observations, interviews and a questionnaire. I describe each method in turn below.

3.3.1 Observation

Six female teachers were observed once to see how often they used Arabic in their teaching and to identify the purposes for which the L1 was used. Teachers gave their permission to be observed but were not told about the focus of the study as this may have affected their behaviour. I developed a checklist, drawing on the literature discussed earlier (see 2.1 above), and which listed various purposes for using the L1. During observations, every time the L1 was used by the teacher, a tick was placed next to the relevant purpose on the checklist. I also audio recorded the lessons and listened to the recordings afterwards to check that my analysis on the observation sheet was accurate.

3.3.2 Interviews

The teachers observed were also interviewed after the lesson. These interviews lasted 15-20 minutes and their aim was to explore why teachers used the L1 in the lessons observed. In the interviews I asked the teachers three main questions:

1. Why did you use the L1 for....? (e.g. for giving instructions or explaining vocabulary);
2. Are there any alternatives you could have used?
3. Why did you not use them?

Interviews were not recorded as I felt this would have made the teachers more cautious in their responses; teachers are used to discussing their lessons with an observer as part of our peer observation scheme and I wanted the interviews to resemble that situation as much as possible. I took notes during the interviews (see the Appendix for an example).

3.3.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to follow up issues that came out of the observations and interviews. It had three sections. The first consisted of eight closed questions. These provided quantitative data on teachers' views about the frequency and purposes of L1 use in young learner English classrooms. The second section had 10 statements about using the L1. The teachers were asked to express their opinion on these by choosing from five choices between strongly agree and strongly

disagree. The third section consisted of open questions designed to elicit teachers' views about using the L1 and about the factors that might affect its use in young learner classrooms.

4 FINDINGS

Here I present the findings from the three data collection strategies described above.

4.1 Observations

All six teachers observed used Arabic, though to differing degrees and for different reasons. Figure 1 below presents the overall picture that emerges when we analyse the results of the observation according to how often the L1 was used for different purposes.

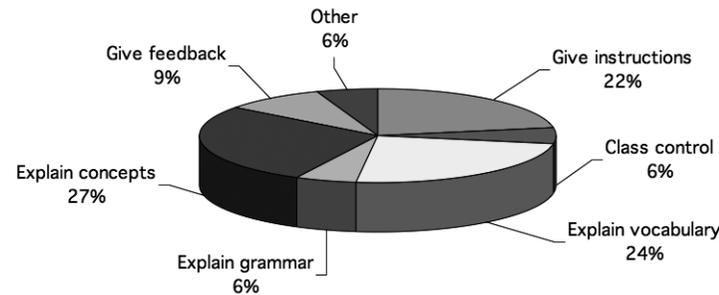


Figure 1: Reasons for using the L1 in six observed lessons

This figure shows that explaining concepts was the most common reason for using the L1 in the lessons observed, followed by explaining vocabulary and giving instructions (these three categories accounted for 73% of all recorded uses of the L1).

4.2 Interviews

4.2.1 Why Teachers Used the L1

In each interview I showed the teacher the observation sheet which listed the different reasons why the L1 had been used in her lesson. I then asked her to comment on her reasons for using the L1 in each case (e.g. why did you use the L1 to explain vocabulary?). A common reason given by the teachers was that using the L1 supported learners' understanding. Two teachers said that using the L1 was the best way to explain abstract vocabulary and new concepts, such as 'pollution'. One teacher also said that using the L1 saved time and also allowed the teacher to check that the learners were paying attention.

4.2.2 *Alternatives to the L1*

In response to the question about alternatives to the L1, teachers mentioned a common set of ideas: gestures, facial expressions, pictures and actions. Four of the teachers, though, also gave examples of situations where these strategies might not work, such as when dealing with words describing feelings and which cannot be easily mimed.

4.2.3 *Reasons for not Using Alternatives*

A common reason cited by the teachers for not using non-L1 alternatives was their experience of what works and does not work with their young learners. Teachers gave examples of topics which learners did not have background knowledge about (e.g. pollution) and for which some explanation in the L1 was helpful. The teachers also noted that their teacher's book advised in places that the L1 could be used. Teachers also reported that they often used the L1 after alternative strategies involving English had failed.

4.3 Questionnaires

4.3.1 *Reasons for Using the L1*

Forty questionnaires were returned of the 50 sent out (a response rate of 80%). Table 1 summarizes the frequency with which teachers said they used the L1 for various purposes.

Table 1: Reasons for using the L1

Uses of L1	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
Explain concepts	0	3	37	0
Explain vocabulary	0	3	35	2
Explain grammar	2	19	17	2
Class control	1	9	24	6
Give instructions	1	4	20	15
Give feedback	2	8	16	14
Total	6	46	149	39

It is clear that the respondents said they used the L1 for a range of reasons, although overall, the levels of using L1 reported here were not high (i.e. the number of teachers saying they used the L1 sometimes is much higher than the responses for 'always' or 'usually'. In contrast with the findings of the observations, teaching grammar was here the reason for which the L1 was most used (19 teachers said they used the L1 'usually' for grammar).

4.3.2 Beliefs about Using the L1

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of Likert scale statements about the use of the L1. Results are summarized in Table 2, which gives the percentage of teachers (out of a total of 40) who selected each answer to each statement.

Table 2: Teachers' beliefs about using the L1

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
L1 helps learners to understand new concepts.	5	77.5	7.5	10	0
L1 helps learners to understand new vocabulary.	5	47.5	10	35	2.5
L1 helps learners to understand grammar points better.	20	52.5	12.5	12.5	2.5
L1 makes it easy for teacher to control the class.	10	25	10	40	15
L1 makes pupils feel comfortable and less stressed.	2.5	47.5	7.5	32.5	10
L1 makes pupils depend on translation all the time.	35	32.5	5	20	7.5
L1 reduces the amount of comprehensible input pupils receive.	17.5	50	5	22.5	5
English teachers should use English all the time because pupils do not hear English out of school.	12.5	40	0	30	17.5
Teachers of young learners need to use a lot of L1.	5	25	7.5	45	17.5
L1 does not help pupils learn and improve different skills and strategies to comprehend English messages.	12.5	45	15	15	12.5

The attitudes towards the L1 expressed here are quite positive; teachers generally agreed that the L1 is useful for explaining: over 82% agreed or agreed strongly that the L1 helps learners understand concepts, vocabulary and grammar. At the same time, teachers acknowledged that using the L1 reduces comprehensible input in English and makes learners depend on translation. The teachers, too, tended to disagree that much L1 was needed with young learners and to agree that using the L1 did not promote the development of skills and strategies for understanding English.

4.3.3 Open-Ended Questions

I will focus here on the open-ended questions which explored teachers' views about the factors which may influence their decisions to use the L1.

The first question was 'What is the relationship between the use of L1 and time

available?'. More than half of the respondents said that using the L1 might save time in explaining and illustrating new vocabulary, concepts or grammar, especially with young learners. Several teachers also said, though, that using the L1 might waste class time if it is used inappropriately.

The second question was 'What is the relationship between learners' age/ language level and the use of L1?'. The majority of the participants agreed that young learners need more L1 explanations than older learners. There was a common view that as learners become more proficient the need for teachers to use the L1 decreases. A minority said that decisions about using the L1 were influenced not only by learners' level but also by the topic of the lesson and the language points to be focused on.

The third question was 'What is the relationship between the topic and the use of L1?'. All teachers who answered this question agreed that there is a relationship between the topic and the use of the L1. They said that complex topics which were unfamiliar to learners typically needed to be introduced with some L1 use.

5 DISCUSSION

This study investigated teachers' attitudes and reported practices regarding the use of the L1 in young learner English classrooms in Oman. I found that the L1 is commonly used in English lessons, though for a range of purposes and with varying degrees of frequency. Explaining concepts and vocabulary and giving instructions were among the most common reasons for using the L1. While using the L1 to explain grammar was not much in evidence in the observations, the questionnaire suggested that teachers use the L1 quite often for this purpose.

Although I expected to find widespread use of the L1 to control the class, I found few examples of this in the observations, and in the questionnaire only a minority of teachers agreed the L1 could be used to enhance classroom control. This finding may have been influenced by the timing of this research – it took place towards the end of the scholastic year, by when teachers will have developed systems for managing and controlling classes.

Teachers expressed a range of views about the advantages and disadvantages of using the L1 in English lessons. They also identified different factors which influenced their decision to use the L1. These were the time available, learners' knowledge of concepts, vocabulary and grammar, learners' proficiency, and learners' age. This suggests that deciding to use the L1 is not simply based on a belief about whether it is beneficial for language learning; teachers' decisions were also based on a range of information about the specific learners and materials they worked with.

5.1 Limitations

While the study went smoothly there is always room for improvement. For example, observing each teacher only once means the teachers may have taught a special lesson just for me (although I did not disclose my particular focus in advance). And while observations were recorded, the quality of the recording in two lessons was not very good and I may therefore have missed some examples of

mother tongue use while I was transcribing. Finally, although I had intended to study the factors which underpin teachers' beliefs about L1 use, I did not generate much information about this issue, either because of the kinds of questions I asked teachers, or perhaps because such factors are often implicit and therefore hard to bring to the surface.

6 CONCLUSION

The study has shown that, overall, the teachers in this study believe that the L1 has a role to play in the young learner English classroom. They expressed generally positive views about L1 use, though they were aware of potential problems this could lead to. There were naturally some disagreements among teachers on some of the issues addressed in the questionnaire, but such disagreements are not surprising given that the use of the L1 in the teaching of English remains a matter of debate. I hope, though, that this research can provide the basis of continuing work of this kind. My position as a result of this study is that "mother tongue use should be selective and not seen as just an easy option. If the teacher decides to use it in class, they need to consider carefully the reasons for doing so, and examine its necessity for individual situations" (Hawks 2001: 6). Teachers, then, can benefit from exploring their own views on this issue and becoming aware of their reasons for using (or avoiding) the L1 in their English lessons.

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APPENDIX: EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW NOTES

Reports of the interviews:

Date: 26.4.05

Teacher: (1)

Class: Three

1. Why did you use L1:

As an answer for this question the teacher said that she used L1 to support learners understanding. She mentioned that L1 help her children to understand some difficult concepts and she gave example from her lesson the idea "that some animals live on land and in water".

2. Are there any alternative you could use instead of L1:

She said that for her lesson pictures might help learners to understand as well as using other resources (books about animals). However, she think that L1 was used appropriately in her lesson.

3. Why did not use that alternative and you chose L1:

She said that for some concepts it is difficult to use pictures or mime the meaning. She used the same example to explain that it is difficult from pictures to understand that some animals can live in two places as she noticed that from her learners faces and performance. She added that her use of L1 in this lesson did ~~not~~ affect the learning of new vocabulary in a positive way and the lesson was mostly in English so there wasn't any problems with using L1.