

## THE USE THE L1 IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOMS IN KUWAIT

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**ABSTRACT:** *Drawing on an ethnographic approach, this research aims at exploring how teachers use L1 in the primary classrooms in Kuwait government schools. It reports on the process of generating qualitative data, namely teacher interview to answer the research question. A brief background of the literature on the use of L1 in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is presented first. Then a rationale for using teacher interview as a qualitative method is discussed. Data analysis and interpretation show how the data from the teacher interview resulted in the same views as that of the literature and research and new ones emerged from the interview that were not in the literature. Finally, it concludes with the researchers' reflection on the whole process.*

**KEYWORDS:** L1, Primary Classrooms, Kuwait

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### BACKGROUND

English (L2) is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in Kuwait government schools, while Arabic (L1) is the native language of instruction along with all the other subjects. The implementation of teaching English from the primary level (grade 1) in Kuwait began in the school year 1992/1993. Before that, English was taught at the age of 10 when students enter intermediate level school (Al-Mutawa, 1996:15).

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has set the goals and the curriculum of EFL primary education along with the benchmarks students at the end of the school year are expected to achieve (Al-Rasheedi, 2012:135). Teachers also have an obligatory syllabus and a detailed lesson plan to follow. Furthermore, the teachers' guide book determines in details how the lesson should start and end, including what body movement the teacher is expected to perform (teaching style) along with what teaching method to use (for example the integrated approach).

The MOE has also guidelines on the use of Arabic in the classroom saying "too much use of Arabic in the classroom is probably not good language teaching practice. If English is not the main language used in the classroom, the pupils are not going to learn very much English" (Allen and Iggulden, 2011:VIII). Teachers are also informed not to use Arabic in the EFL class.

### Significance of the Study & Research Question

This research aims at exploring how the teachers use L1 in the primary classroom. This topic is a matter of importance because it sheds light on the different learning strategies that can be

used in the classroom with young learners in Kuwait to enhance learning of English rather than stick to the traditional common ones that are being used. Finding a way to use it, rather than dismiss it, to maximize learning should be revisited instead of shunning it out. As Ellis (1997) states, “the learner’s L1 can facilitate L2 acquisition” (Ellis, 1997:51). Furthermore, research has shown how bilingual learners are influenced by their first language, and having an awareness of that will influence their performance on the second language (Mitchell and Myles, 1998).

For the purpose of this study, we will take a look at Cameron’s (2013) categories on why the teachers use the L1 in the classroom as a basis for interpreting the data analysis gathered. The categories are:

- Teacher-led choice
- Explaining new language - translation
- Giving instructions
- Checking understanding
- Talking about language
- Disciplining

Cameron’s (2013) categories were set up to maximize the learning of the L2 ensuring "that the use of first language supports the children’s language learning" (2013:209). The main research question of this study is:

How do teachers use the L1 with the young learners in the classroom?

## **METHODOLOGY**

To answer the research question, we found it best to use qualitative methods, namely teacher interview, which is a “critical method in the effective measurement of quality in teaching and learning” (O’Sullivan, 2006:252). Therefore, we found this method the most appropriate to use to answer our research question based on our topic. Before embarking on the interview procedure, we need to shed light on some factors that we had to undertake in order to conduct a teacher interview in Kuwait.

### **Sampling and Procedures**

The focus of this research is on how the teacher is using the L1 in the primary classroom in Kuwait. With that focus in mind, a purposive sample is used as a sampling strategy. According to Merriam (1998:61), a purposeful sample will help “discover, understand, and gain insight” and therefore we selected a sample from which the most can be learned. With that in mind and based on our familiarity with school districts in Kuwait, we chose to interview a teacher in a school that is both familiar and near us. There are six districts in Kuwait, namely Al-Asmaa, Hawalli, Al-Jahra, Farwaneya, Mubarak Al-Kabeer and Ahmadi (*World data on education*, 2010). Each has its own Educational Zone and an approval is needed to enter a school in a district has to be done through its educational zone.

In order to gain access to the school, several steps needed to be undertaken, namely, granting permission and approval through gatekeepers. In this context, a gatekeeper includes

“professionals who run organizations, service providers, care givers, parents, relatives or guardians” (Robson, 2007:211).

First, we had to obtain a letter from The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). The second step required us to write a letter briefly discussing what we intend to undertake at the school. The third step was to go to the educational school district and obtain a letter from them stating the name of the school we intend to go to. The final step was to get permission from the school and take an appointment to interview a teacher.

After going through the above channels of authority, ethical considerations were taken into account before accessing the school for teacher interview. Understanding how “access will be undertaken – to whom does one have to go, both formally and informally, to gain access to the target group” (Cohen et al., 2011:152) is something we had every care to achieve. We used both formal and informal measures to access the sample: formally where we undertook the official paper work procedures, and informally where we verbally requested whether or not we could interview a teacher after discussing my research.

We deliberately chose to interview a teacher with 2-4 years of teaching experience in the primary school. The reason for doing that was because we wanted to gain insight on how much of her recent teacher training and education she applies in the classroom with regards to using the L1 or she follows her beliefs. We think that teachers with short teaching experience tend to bring their beliefs to the classroom, which informs their teaching.

### **Interview Rationale**

Interviewing is defined as “a research method typically involves you, as a researcher, asking questions and, hopefully, receiving answers from the people you are interviewing” (Robson, 2007:278.) We used interviewing as our qualitative method to generate data that will help us answer our research question. The interview questions were set out in a way to obtain fruitful answers. It also gave room for insight, reflection and personal opinions of the teacher. Interviewing was used as a means to collect data and gather knowledge from teachers on what they know (facts), what they do (behaviour), and what they think or feel (attitudes) (Robson, 2007:280). According to Tuckman (1972 cited in Cohen et al., 2011:411) interviews allows insight into a person's head (knowledge and information), what a person likes and dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs).

We interviewed one female teacher for the duration of 43 minutes. There are only female teachers in the primary schools in Kuwait. A law was passed in 2004 that requires all teachers in the primary level to be female (including EFL teachers) in all the public schools in Kuwait (*The national report development of education in the State of Kuwait*, 2008:10). Al-Mutawa (1997:47) justifies the reason for taking such measures by saying that “female teachers are more suitable for teaching in the primary stage compared with men”. The interview was voice-recorded after gaining her consent.

Before conducting the interview with the teacher, a participant information sheet and consent form were formulated in English and given to the teacher before the day of the interview. On the day of the interview, we went over both forms to make sure she fully understood what is required from her and if there were any questions she would like to ask. Cohen et al. (2011:442) lists ethical questions one must take under consideration, and the first includes

informed consent from the interviewee.

The interview was conducted in a public place that makes her comfortable, in a time and day convenient to her. We initially scheduled the interview to last one hour, but knowing our culture and traditions, we knew the interview was going to last for at least two hours where it is seen as impolite to sit with someone just to get information and leave. We understand that an interview is a social and interpersonal encounter and not just a place to get the information needed which is something we considered along the interviewing process (Cohen et al., 2011). Furthermore, we asked whether she would like the interview to be done in Arabic or English and she said Arabic and we approved to ease the process for her. The interview was conducted on April 23, 2014 at 6:30 pm and lasted until 9:30 pm.

The interview questions were semi-structured, in an order which can be modified depending on how the interview goes (Robson, 2007). Semi-structured interviews have more flexibility and freedom (Cohen et al., 2011:415) and since we wanted to know both facts and attitudes, this approach was best fit to suit our needs. The questions developed were concerned with facts, beliefs and attitudes (Robson, 2007:280). We avoided long questions, double-barrelled questions, questions involving jargon, leading questions, and biased questions to make the interviewee comfortable and at ease (Robson, 2007). The majority of the questions devised were open-ended, which are “those that supply a frame of reference for respondents’ answers, but put a minimum of restraint on the answers and their expression” (Kerlinger, 1970 cited in Cohen et al., 2011:426). That way, teachers are given the space to speak freely without feeling constricted.

Before conducting the interview, for ethical and cultural reasons, we asked if we can voice-record the interview to which she approved as long as it is both anonymous and confidential. We guaranteed the interviewee confidentiality based on her request. This shows that:

interviewing within one's own cultural community—as an insider—affords researchers a degree of social proximity that, paradoxically, increases awareness amongst both researcher and participant of the social divisions that structure the interaction between them”(Gange and Scott, 2006:2)

By "insider" research, it refers to the social interviews conducted between the researcher and teacher who share a similar “cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage” (Gange and Scott, 2006:2) being an insider was an advantage, speaking the same language eased and made the interview flow smoothly.

We then followed Robson’s (2007:284) sequence of questions:

1. *Introduction*: we introduced ourselves and the goal of the research. We also went over the participant information sheet and consent form.
2. *Warm up*: Easy question so both of us feel at ease.
3. *Main body of interview*: Main questions asked and main topics covered.
4. *Cool-off*: a few straightforward questions at the end to defuse any tension that might have built up.
5. *Closure*: Thank interviewee for their time.

The different questions included in the interview schedule addressed our research questions

and how they viewed them, applied them, and changed them in their lesson (See Appendix 1).

### **Recording of data:**

The collection of data from the interview was done by voice recording alone without writing any notes. We wanted to take notes on multiple occasions during the interview, but for considerations related to the Arab culture, it would seem rude to not look the person talking to you in the eye while they are talking. Therefore, as soon as the interview was over, we took notes immediately on what we observed since the interview was still fresh in mind. Miles and Huberman (1994:51) on notes taken after the interview say that it should “be marked to guard against bias”, so we tried our best to write it objectively without making notes on what we thought she meant. Furthermore, before transcribing the interview data, we wrote in our DRC journal about the interview experience as a way to aid in reflection and the details of the interview. Furthermore, writing the events that occurred in our journal was a way to ensure dependability of the research by being explicit and transparent with the research process.

### **Data Analysis**

Richards (2003:81) says “the first step to any adequate analysis of interview data must be transcription”. The voice recording of the interview was translated from Arabic and English and transcribed on a computer using Microsoft Word. We used the old fashioned way in transcribing the audio from the interview, playback and rewind and pause. The advantage of taping: “the tape provides a permanent record and allows one to concentrate on the conduct of the interview” (Robson, 2007:300). Since the interview lasted 40 minutes, we transcribed the entire recording for analysis of the data.

Blake (2011, in Sutrisno et al., 2013:4) defines translation in qualitative research interviews as “a dialogue between the original texts in the source language and the translation in the target language, mediated by the translator, which results in a co-dependence between the two texts”. We tried to do a literal translation but on multiple occasions it was difficult to do so because sometimes sentences simply cannot translate such as cultural idioms that not only cannot be translated, but even if done it would not be understood nor make sense. Furthermore, while translating the data, we kept reminding ourselves not to compromise the research by writing what we think she meant rather than what she really said, as Sutrisno et al., 2013:1) asks “translation then needs to be employed in such research but ... how efficiently is the translation of data done so as not to compromise the research?”

As for the procedure of translation, we used single translation which is where “the data are translated from the source language to the target language” (Sutrisno et al., 2013:4). It is not as complicated as transcribing in Arabic first and then again in English, making it faster to just listen in Arabic and translate in English writing it in such way which we found to be best suitable.

The template we used to develop the interview transcription followed Richard’s (2003) template of a table with three columns that includes “a reliable line numbering system, easy transfer of the main text ... and space for comments” (Richards, 2003:81). Below is a sample of our interview data:

Line	Speaker and Talk (Q + A)	Comments
19	B: This is your way. You don't use Arabic from the beginning rather as a final option.	<i>Wanted to know on what basis she used Arabic as a last resources. Whether it was her belief, style, orders ..etc</i>
20	H: Yes I use Arabic as a final option; but it's not just my way, it's what the majority of teachers with me do. Actually, from the head supervisor, we are told that we are not allowed to use Arabic especially with older students	

To analyze the data we got after transcribing the interview, we used thematic coding analysis as a tool for analysis and further interpretation. Coding is referred to how “several passages are identified and they are then linked with a name for that idea – the code” (Robson, 2007:475). It is a way that involves identifying parts of the text to a theme that exemplifies the same code. To do that, we used Cameron’s (2003) categories as themes (as we have mentioned at the beginning of the paper) and added to them more themes that emerged from the interview data (See Appendix 2). Therefore, from the beginning of the interview, we already had established themes from literature and research and wanted to see if they were to emerge in the interview and explore possible new ones, as Robson says (2007:475) “from the start of data collection, you should be looking out for issues for interest in the data including possible patterns or themes” (Robson, 2007:475). Furthermore, it was only until after the data we got from the interview were we able to fit those themes/codes into the literature being able to identify the reasons for L1 use to a particular situation or example is a specific article I read as Robson (2007:475) states “however, there is nothing to stop you starting the analysis with predetermined codes or themes, perhaps arising from your reading of the research literature, and/or the research questions you are interested in”. Lastly, new themes did emerge from the data that were not a part of Cameron’s (2013) categories but are included in other literature, therefore thematic coding analysis made “codes and themes emerge purely from your interaction with the data” (Robson, 2007:475).

### **Integration and interpretation**

Now that we conducted the interview to gather data and used thematic coding to analyze it, the next step was to interpret the data and integrate it into the literature. This step is crucial for it showed us what our data ‘means’ in order to answer the research question. We did that by first reading the data repeatedly in order to look for meanings and patterns in and within both the literature and the collected data, as Robson states “allow time to immerse yourself in the data so you are really familiar with what you have collected” (Robson, 2007:477).

To interpret the data, we used both the thematic map (See Appendix 2) and category table based on themes (See Appendix 3) as a means to integrate the literature into my analysis. Using a word processor, I saw that I was able to interpret it through both “data-driven” and “theory-driven” (Robson, 2007:479).

To begin with, to analyze the interview data we made a detailed transcript of the interview rather than just writing down the themes or answers that only answer our research question.

We did that for two reasons: first to follow Robson (2007) when saying “having a detailed transcript ... is necessary to carry out an analysis” (Robson, 2007:478); and second we wanted to be transparent writing everything down and not deliberately omitting anything the interviewee said.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009 cited in Robson, 2007:300) offer methods in analyzing the interview data calling it ‘How shall I find a method to analyze the 1,000 pages of interview transcript’ which include:

1. How shall I conduct my interviews so that meaning can be analyzed in a coherent and creative way?
2. How do I go about finding out what the interviews tell me about what I want to know?
3. How can the interviews assist in extending my knowledge of the phenomenon I am investigating?

## **DISCUSSION**

In the interview we used specific questions on the interviewee's personal use of using the L1 in the classroom to answer the research question and obtain more information. Cook (2001) states how using L1 in the classroom teachers can convey meaning and organize the class. Indeed, the interviewee listed these two uses of the L1 in the classroom as can be seen in the categories A and H (See Appendix 2). It was faster and easier to look at how this research falls under what the teacher said by looking at the category schedule than referring to the complete interview transcript to find the utterances. We believe that is because each theme in the interview did not appear as a separate category, rather within and throughout the interview themes appeared in addition to other ones and the category schedule made it easier to categorize the themes in one place and include the specific utterance.

As for teachers' belief in using the L1 in the classroom and where it stemmed from, even though the interviewee did not believe in using Arabic, in reality she did use it and for multiple purposes. Furthermore, even though MOE gives rules and instructions not to, she goes against it and does use it in the classroom (See category B in Appendix 2). Copland and Neokleous (2010:277) recognize this as an emotion of guilt that appears to teachers who use the L1 in the classroom because it contradicts with their “attitudes, practices, and beliefs”. Cook (2001) also says how “teachers resort to the L1 despite their best intentions and often feeling guilty for straying from the L2 path” (405). Unfortunately, literature and research did not consider this as an aspect on why the teacher uses the L1 in the classroom. Research mentioned how sometimes teachers feel guilty in using the L1, and I see that as partially informing teacher belief.

The interviewee also expressed the opinion that the use of L1 in her classes is motivated by the fact Arabic is a shared language between both the teacher and the students. The previous literature shed light on a factor that we found to be best suited in our context: how the use of L1 is more successful in classrooms where the teacher and students share the same L1. For example, Copland and Neokleous, 2010:270) say:

L1 use has particular relevance for bilingual English teachers, especially those who share a first language with their learners. These teachers are able to draw on two languages as resources in the classroom.

Cameron (2003) also states that “in practice, research and anecdotal evidence suggest that most teachers who share their pupils’ mother tongue, use a mixture of the foreign language and the mother tongue” (199).

Furthermore, (Ammar et al., 2010:129) acknowledge this by saying that “the influence of the L2 may be especially great in classrooms where learners share the same L1”. Since government schools in Kuwait are for Kuwaitis only, not only does this make the task easier for the teacher having the whole class speak Arabic, they share the same culture and will better relate to activities that promote this relationship. That is because there is no need for the teacher to ‘negotiate for meaning’ to clarify meaning in the learners interlanguage. By that “not only do they understand each other when they produce sentences using interlanguage patterns that are influenced by their shared L1, they may also reinforce each other’s interlanguage forms by providing input containing those forms” (Ammar et al., 2010:129).

In regards to the use of L1 for classroom management, the interviewee expressed the opinion that as she is teaching grade 2 boys who are naughty, she has to resort to L1 in order to scold them:

Line	Speaker and Talk (Q and A)	Comments
95	H: yes in Arabic because you can’t scold in English. You can’t say “close your mouth in English” they will not be afraid. It has to be from the heart in Arabic.	<i>We both laughed because scolding in Arabic has a major impact than when done in English</i>

The same response was from Cook (2001:415) who explains “the need to maintain control over secondary school classes often calls for the L1. Saying ‘shut up or you will get a detention’ in the L1 is a serious threat” (Cook, 2001:415). Furthermore, understanding our culture, our context made us laugh and understand her knowing the students, rather than get shocked on how a teacher yelled at children in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on an ethnographic approach, this research aims at exploring how teachers use L1 in the primary classrooms in Kuwait government schools. It reports on the process of generating qualitative data, namely teacher interview to answer the research question: How do teachers use the L1 with the young learners in the classroom? A brief background of the literature on the use of L1 in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is presented first. Then a rationale for using teacher interview as a qualitative method is discussed. Data analysis and interpretation show how the data from the teacher interview resulted in the same views as that of the literature and research and new ones emerged from the interview that were not in the literature.

From the data we gathered from the interview, we can conclude that using L1 in the primary classroom can enhance L2 learning. The interview data, supported the literature that looked at L1 learning from context. We did not expect to get data from the interview that not only fell under many themes regarding L1 literature, but managed to have a new theme emerge that was important and not in the literature, that of teacher belief. We are now curious to see how teacher belief informs classroom practice and how they use it going against the MOE rules and guidelines into how to teach EFL in the primary classroom. As Cook (2001) puts it “brining the L1 back from exile may lead not only to the improvement of existing teaching methods but also to innovations in methodology” (2001:419)

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### **Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

1. Introduction: introduce ourselves, goal of the research, go over the participant information sheet and consent form.
2. Warm up: to make the interviewee feel at ease, we asked a simple question “Do you use Arabic when teaching students?”
3. Main body of interview:
  - a. How often do you use Arabic per lesson?
  - b. Why do you use it? Please give me reasons
  - c. What is your belief in teaching English by using Arabic?
  - d. Have you found it useful using Arabic?
  - e. Do you think your students are learning better when you use Arabic?
  - f. Do other teachers use Arabic when teaching English?
  - g. How important do you think is using Arabic?
  - h. Do you use it in all your classrooms?
  - i. Does the curriculum/syllabus tell you to use Arabic or not?
  - j. Do you feel bad by using Arabic when teaching English?
  - k. DO you allow the students to use Arabic in the classroom?
  - l. Do you think using Arabic helps maximize learning English?
  - m. Do different tasks change how much you use Arabic?
4. Cool off: would you like to add anything else? A simple question to bring the interview to a close
5. Closure: thank the interviewee for their time and agreeing to participate in the interview.

**Appendix 2: Organizing utterances into categories based on themes**

Category/Themes	Utterance	Notes
<b>A. To explain/give meaning to certain words</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sometimes you can't explain some words such as abstract ones because it is hard to explain the meaning to the students.</li> <li>- they will understand the meaning of the word quicker.</li> <li>- If I am teaching something new.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Translation</li> <li>- Meaning</li> <li>- Teach vocabulary</li> <li>- Check understanding</li> </ul>
<b>B. Guilt. Validating her use of L1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- there are things where the lesson material does not serve or help me so we use Arabic</li> <li>- But Arabic is used as a last resource, and not from the beginning.</li> <li>- no I don't because I don't use it much. And when I do it's when I genuinely need to use it.</li> <li>- My head supervisor told me not use Arabic when teaching unless you really have to and there is not other way, but still in the end I use Arabic</li> </ul>	- Guilt vs belief
<b>C. Teacher-led choice (Cameron)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes I use Arabic as a final option; but it's not just my way, it's what the majority of teachers with me do. Actually, from the head supervisor, we are told that we are not allowed to use Arabic especially with older students</li> <li>- Well it's not allowed by the Ministry for us to use Arabic, but the supervisor tells us yes we can use Arabic but again as a last resource.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher belief</li> <li>- Ministry rules</li> </ul>
<b>D. Belief in using L1 in the classroom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- My belief stems from how I learned the language from the beginning.</li> <li>- as a student where my teacher did not use Arabic. And I followed this method because of how I learned English.</li> <li>Another belief is my own experience in life in acquiring the language</li> <li>- Going back to the students. When</li> </ul>	Teacher belief

	they know their teacher does not speak/use Arabic, he tries very hard thinking how to explain himself.	
<b>E. Usefulness of using L1 when teaching L2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sometimes, to a certain degree.</li> <li>- But generally I use Arabic more with year 1 even if the classroom has smart students. But it is less with year 2 students to some extent to about 5% of Arabic use in the classroom.</li> <li>- I find it useful to use Arabic.</li> <li>- sometimes. For reasons I explained earlier. I feel it gives them confidence but not improving their English usage.</li> <li>- This way, he learned new information, new language vocabulary and I was also able to manage the classroom.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To give explanation</li> <li>- To enhance learning</li> <li>- To maximize learning</li> </ul>
<b>F. Giving instructions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes! Especially with new activities I have to use Arabic</li> <li>- Yes of course I do.</li> <li>- yes so he can answer the questions correctly.</li> <li>- During the exam period I become diligent making sure they fully understand it.</li> <li>- Moreover, on the first day of school in the class I explain the rules in Arabic.-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Classroom management</li> <li>- Translation</li> <li>- Help students</li> <li>- To set a task</li> <li>- To explain activities</li> </ul>
<b>G. Talk about language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes I do but to teach them information that is outside the syllabus. For example I would tell them “a goldfish is as important as <i>zbaidi</i> in the USA”.</li> <li>- yes I do it a lot.</li> <li>If not daily then 2-3 times a week.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Language</li> <li>- Meaning</li> <li>- i + l</li> </ul>
<b>H. Discipline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I have to repeat the rules to manage the classroom</li> <li>- yes in Arabic because you can't scold in English</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Classroom management</li> <li>- Praise</li> <li>- Discipline</li> </ul>

**Appendix3: Thematic network based on interview data**

