

DOES ARABIC LANGUAGE ACT AS A SUPPORTIVE TOOL FOR LEARNING ENGLISH IN SAUDI ARABIAN CLASSES?

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ABSTRACT: *This paper presents an argument regarding whether Arabic language is useful in supporting the learning process of English language in Saudi Arabian classes. The paper address the literature review in the area regarding languages as supportive tools in learning English. Finally, the paper conclude that Arabic language is of extreme importance and act as a supportive tool for learning English language. Arabic language is very important for the process of learning English especially for English beginners.*

KEYWORDS: Arabic, Education, English Language, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

This paper is written from the perspective of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Saudi Arabia and the issues related to the use of L1 (Arabic) to facilitate the second language acquisition in the classroom. The use of L2 (English) only in the classroom makes sense when the students do not have the same first language, for instance, students from various countries taking an English-language course in the UK, or in case where the English language teacher does not understand or is not fluent in the first language of his or her students. However, this paper assumes the case of teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia where all Saudi students and faculty have the same L1 i.e. Arabic. This paper also assumes that the teacher of EFL has command over L1 spoken by the students.

Macaro (2009) presents three viewpoints existing in the literature with respect to the use of L1 in L2 classroom: a) Virtual position – the exclusive use of L2 that contends that there is no pedagogical or communicative value in the first language at all during the L2 learning, b) Optimal position – supports the judicious and principled use of L1 in the classroom for the correction in meaning and structure of L2, and c) Maximal position – contends that although few controlled and structured references to L1 are permitted, L2 can primarily be learnt only through the use of the target language.

The review of literature reveals that strong arguments exist for and against the use of first language during second language or target language learning classroom, such as English. The proponents of using L1 suggest that teachers frequently employ code switching between L1 and L2 to convey their message appropriately to the students of second-language and such a behaviour is natural as it takes place in real life situations, especially in case of bilinguals when they are speaking to a person of their native language and who might also understand the second language of the speaker (Macaro, 2009). Furthermore, the research has found that the use of first language in L2 learning classroom is gaining significant

popularity (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Cook, 2001; Swain and Lapkin, 2000) because of its role as cognitive and mediating learning tool (Macaro, 2009; Crawford, 2004; Duff and Polio, 1990; Macaro, 2005; Moore, 2002) and positive attitudes from both teachers and students who view the use of L1 as an enabling, simplifying, aiding and negotiating tool for teaching as well as for learning (Flyman-Mattsson and Burenhult, 2009; Macaro, 2001; Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie, 2002; Storch and Aldosari, 2010).

On contrary, the opponents of L1 and L2 learning contend that the target language acquisition and thinking is hampered by the students' thinking in their mother language which acts like a crutch that needs to be disposed of as early as possible for best second-language learning results (Weschler, 1997). (Weschler, 1997) further ascertains that too much reliance on L1 can also result in fossilization of intra-language which will neither be L1 nor L2 and the use of L1 is a drain on both students' and teachers' resources that can better be spent on learning the target language. Furthermore, Cook (2001) suggests that it is necessary for L2 learners to distinguish between and keep the L1 and the target language as separate entities for successful second-language learning. He further poses a question that how will students be convinced about the effectiveness of L2 as a viable means of daily and professional communication if their teacher cannot staunchly promote the use of L2 and is incapable of communicating the appropriate meaning in the second language?

Such arguments make it interesting to investigate into this topic as there is not enough research on the role of Arabic in EFL classes within native Arab setting and this is important to study as the EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia is getting increasingly popular and there is an growing need for research projects that would help in shaping the teaching policies and practices in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia. This paper will develop a case for the re-examination of a long-held view that L1 should be avoided in the classroom by both teachers and students as this view has been justified on the basis of (questionable) compartmentalization of L1 and in the mind of the learner, and maximizing the exposure of second-language learners to the target language. These bases are praiseworthy but these do not rule out the use of first language and L2 learning. Indeed, a number of teaching methods are already employing L1 to create a link between the first language and the target language, such as the Community Language Learning, New Concurrent Method, and Dodson's Bilingual Method. It has been contended that L1 can be a valuable resource for the teachers to convey the meaning and to explain the grammar to arrange the class activities and such method of teaching can also produce genuine L2 learners and doesn't call for absolutely rejecting L1 at all costs.

So, this paper makes a case for the systematic usage of L1 in the classroom starting with the existing reluctance among teachers and students to avoid the usage of L1 in most EFL classes. The later part of the report will highlight the benefits of using L1 in L2 learning classes and will point out certain teaching methods that actively employ L1 in a variety of ways to be used positively by both teachers and students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the ‘great reform’ of late 19th century a number of basic assumptions were developed and accepted by linguists and language teachers and these assumptions were taken for granted as the foundations of language learning and teaching (Hawkins, 1987). These assumptions included in avoidance of explicit usage of grammar in L2 learning, practice of language as a whole rather than separate parts, and discouraging the use of first language in the L2 classroom. Polio and Duff (1994: 324) remarked on such a trend as “teachers have some sense, then, that using the TL as much as possible is important”. It is clear from this remark that the only usage of L2 is seen as positive and important and it may form the basis of an argument to setting aside the L1 of the students.

This banishment in the use of L1 and L2 classroom ranges between total abandonment of first language in the classroom, which in most cases can be achieved if the teacher does not understand the students’ L1 or students do not have a common first language and the Minimized or controlled use of L1 in the classroom. According to Macaro (2009), a Maximal Position provides a more optimistic version of L1 usage in the L2 classroom as it views L1 as a positive contributes to the usefulness of L2 learning; rather than harming it. Most of the teaching methods have directly avoided the use of L1 as contended by (Howatt, 1984, p. 281) that “the monolingual principle, the unique contribution of the twentieth century to classroom language teaching, remains the bed-rock notion from which the others ultimately derive”, and this point of view has also been supported by (Stern, 1992, p. 281) who was of the view that “the intra-lingual position in teaching is so strong, many writers do not even consider cross-lingual objectives”. The literature further points to the fact that ideal second language learning classroom has been considered as the one with no or very minimal use of L1 and there haven't been any locatable discussions of the classroom use of first language (Skehan, 1998; Crookes and Gass, 1993) and the only time L1 has been mentioned in the class was to advice against its usage during target language learning (Halliwell and Jones, 1991). Even academics who are open to using L1 in the L2 class, for instance (Macaro, 1997) and Duff and Polio (1990), have often suggested enhancing the usage of L2 in the class to minimize the variability in the use of L2 by the learners.

However, avoiding L1 in the classroom doesn't mean that teachers did not use them in the daily lives Lucas and Katz (1994, p. 558) contend, “Naturam expelles furca, tamen usque recurret: like nature, the L1 creeps back in, however many times you throw it out with a pitch-fork.” Despite their best intentions, EFL teachers working in a native Arab setting often resort to Arabic and feeling guilty about such court switching. Research by Mitchell (1988, p. 28) showed that he such teachers “seemed almost to feel they were making an admission of professional misconduct in ‘confessing’ to low levels of FL use.” Yet completely avoiding the L1 can restrict the possibility of language learning in a natural environment as advised by Willis (1996, p. 130) “Don’t ban mother-tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language”. Here are some reasons mentioned in the literature to avoid L1 during L2 acquisition.

Language Compartmentalization

The first argument against the use of L1 in L2 classroom is based on the notion that successful L2 acquisition can only be possible if L2 is kept separate from the first language of learners. This notion suggests that the second language teaching should develop two language systems in the mind of the learner through coordinated bilingualism; rather than forming a single language system through compound bilingualism (Weinreich, 1953) i.e. second language learning should happen without any link to L1. Such notion originates from knowledge transfer theories – Contrastive Analysis (Lado, 1957), which argue that linguistic problems from L1 creep into L2 learning so the use of L1 should be eliminated. Following such notion in the teaching methodology, teachers tend to teach the meaning of an L2 word without recourse to the L1 by showing pictures and avoiding translation in an effort to develop a separate L2 system in learners' mind.

However, this notion of developing separate language compartments in the mind are not entirely justified as the research suggests that two languages are interwoven in terms of the vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and pragmatics and this makes the second language learner more flexible in terms of thinking in L2 as they are not governed by cultural stereotypes and rules (Cook, 1994; Beauvillain and Grainger, 1987; Locastro, 1987; Obler, 1982; Cook, 1997). The argument put forth by compartmentalization is not justified as the meanings of L2 do not exist from those of L1 in learners mind (Cook, 1999) and the teaching of L2 should not be considered as building another room in the house; rather it should be considered as rebuilding all the internal structure of the house. It has been further contended that the flexibility and the inimitability of L2 usage can be seen in a code switching mode which is a highly skilled activity that truly represents the 'bilingual mode' of language rather than 'monolingual mode' in which both Arabic and English are used separately (Grosjean 1989). As Stern (1992, 282) comments that "the L1-L2 connection is an indisputable fact of life" so, maintaining the use of L1 and L2 separate is in contradiction with the internal processes of learners' minds and thereby the use of Arabic to facilitate the English language learning can prove to be more successful rather than abandoning it completely.

Argument from Learning of First Language

The original justification to only use L2 (i.e. English) was based on the process in which children acquire their first language and it contends that since monolingual L1 children do not possess and rely on any other language, so, the L2 learners should not rely on their first language. Furthermore, this argument suggests that the L1 acquisition is the perfect method for successful acquisition of language and the teaching of second language should be based on similar characteristics (Asher, 1986). However, the comparison between L1 and L2 learning poses a number of questions as if how is it possible to re-create the similar circumstances for L2 learners as experienced by children while learning their first language? The second language learners have gone through greater social development, have mature minds, enhanced short-term memory, and many other differences from children such as they know how to convey that meaning (Halliday, 1975; Singleton, 1989). It is impossible for the language learning to duplicate the L1 acquisition experience faced by a monolingual child who, by definition, does not possess any other language.

Another argument to justify the sole use of L2 is based on the conviction that second language acquisition is usually unsuccessful as compared to the acquisition of L1 as (Towell and Hawkins, 1994, p. 14) remarked that “Very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers are”. This argument contends that L2 learners do not develop same proficiency as that of a native speaker, but this argument is flawed from its onset as it is considering the language acquisition goals of L1 and L2 as identical. Furthermore, this argument inherently means that L2 learners tend to make failed attempt to become a member of a group (native English language speakers) to which they can never belong. However, it fails to realize that monolingual children achieve competence in one language, while L2 learners try to achieve the similar proficiency in multiple languages (Cook, 1997). So, the success or failure of Arab students learning English as a foreign language should be compared against the performance of L2 learners rather than native speakers to correctly identify the impact of interference from L1 into L2 learning.

An Additional Issue – Arabic Diglossia

The use of Arabic as the first language to facilitate the English language learning and native Arab environment presents another challenge in the form that Arabic is a diglossic language, which means that there are multiple varieties of Arabic spoken in the native Arab culture. This problem goes beyond sociolinguistics and is a part of cultural overtones as in daily usage Arabic is divided between the high language Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, also called *al fusha*) and low level Colloquial Arabic (CA also called *al ‘amiya*) (Ferguson 1959). But, the problem does not arise from merely the classification of Arabic; rather from the functional distinctions in the use of these language strains. Ferguson (1959) and Palmer (2007) contended that MSA is the linguistic standard which is exclusively used for official and formal communication such as reading, political speeches, educational lecture, news broadcast, letter writing and communiqué by educated, but on contrary, CA is used for informal daily communiqué such as family discussions, cultural meetings, informal literature, shopping and entertainment (Schmidt et al 2004).

So, such functional distinction has resulted in diglossic dilemma as to which version of Arabic language should be used as L1 to facilitate the learning of English as a foreign language in native Arab environment, as for some learners such experience is might mean learning a third language along with L2, which can further complicate the L2 acquisition.

Teaching Methods that Support Using L1 in the L2 Learning

In the light of above discussion it is safe to say that L1 can be better integrated into teaching if teachers do not feel guilty about falling back to L1 during L2 classroom. This can be achieved by making teachers realize that there are a number of teaching methods that actively utilize L1 in the L2 classroom and enable teachers to convey the new meanings of the second language to the students. The underlying theory can be categorized in following points:

a) Teacher using L1 for conveying and checking meaning of words or sentences:

The research conducted by (Franklin, 1990) concluded that 39% of the language teachers use L1 for conveying the word and sentence meaning. This practice recognizes that the two languages are linked in the minds of the learners, however, it does not mean that all the

meanings should be related to L1 has translation alone cannot furnish the vocabulary and meaning of every L2 word in L1 (Johansson, 1998). Still, relying upon L1 at the initial stages of second language learning may prove to be efficient in conveying the meaning, assisting in learning and creating natural learning environment in the classroom.

b) Teacher using L1 for explaining grammar:

Traditionally, explicit grammar teaching has been discouraged in L2 classes, the focus on form (FonF) has recently gained popularity as it naturally arises during classroom activities rather than being introduced during the teaching (Long 1991). Doughty and Williams (1998) have raised many questions about implementation of FonF but they never argued about which language to be used. A number of research papers suggest that even advanced users of L2 are less efficient in learning information from L2 than from L1 and teachers find it hard to explain grammar using L2 (Cook, 1997; Macaro, 1997; Polio and Duff, 1994)

c) Teacher using L1 for classroom activities

It is only logical that to perform a certain class activity, students need to understand that and unless that activity is communicated in L1, teachers may find it very hard to communicate that activity to the students. This argument is supplanted by various researchers who have pointed that teachers often resort to L1 after trying in vain to conduct a class activity in L2 (Macaro, 1997; Franklin, 1990; Polio and Duff, 1994). The argument here is to induce efficiency in EFL courses by using Arabic to facilitate the learning process.

d) Student-teacher interaction through L1

Macaro, (1997) stated majority of English teachers try to provide feedback to students in L2, however, it is more real to tell a student about his performance in L1, especially if it includes correction in the suggested work (Franklin, 1990). Furthermore, it is also effective for teachers to switch to L1 to provide personal comments and feedback to the student in order to create the natural environment in which students are not assumed to be perfect second language speakers. Based on these underlying principles the following teaching methodologies are suggested for teachers to utilize Arabic for facilitating the learning of English as a second language in native Arab environment.

Community Language Learning (CLL)

In community language learning, L1 one is attached to L2, and L1 is used to initiate the meaning for L2 in whole sentences. This is achieved by making students talk to each other instinctively in the second language, by using the first language as a mediator (Curran, 1976). This is a three-step process which proceeds as:

- i. students are invited to say something in their first language
- ii. teacher translates the sentence into the target language
- iii. the student who has spoken the sentence in L1 is asked to repeat the same sentence in L2

The translation, along with grammar, structure, and the meaning is overheard by other students in the class and over time as student progresses in their learning the dependence on L1-L2 translations is minimized by the teacher. Although, this method is conventional, it uses L1 as a vehicle to transport the meaning to the L2 sentences. The research from the

Arab world, involving 137 students, 13 EFL teachers and 3 policy makers, suggests that (Machaal, 2012) usage of Arabic with novice English learners has proven to be highly successful in enhancing the comprehension and learning of English language and English-only policy was not proven to be productive with same level students. Therefore, “Arabic is believed to play a useful teaching-learning role that cannot, and therefore, should not be ignored in EFL classes” (Machaal, 2012, p. 215)

The New Concurrent Method

According to (Jacobson, 1990), in the L2 learning classroom the teacher has the liberty to switch from target language to the first language of learners at the key points according to specified rules. For instance, in an EFL class in Saudi Arabia, teacher may switch to Arabic while explaining important concepts, or when students are losing interest of getting distracted, or to praise/reprimand the student behaviour. This method recognizes the bilingualism of students and acknowledges that code switching is a natural and normal activity, and it appreciates the students to be real L2 users rather than treating them like native target language speakers. Using this method, teachers can increase the exposure to target language especially during revising a lesson that has already been communicated in Arabic. Using this method, EFL classes in Saudi Arabia can mimic the real life situation in which speakers use both languages concurrently rather than pretending the existence of L2 monolingual situation.

In a more radical concurrent teaching environments, code switching is performed within the same sentence rather than between sentences and students and teachers use L1 to furnish vocabulary items they don't know in L2 (Giaque and Ely, 1990). Overall, the purpose of this teaching methodology is to support learning through a more natural L2 environment.

Dodson's Bilingual Method

Dodson's bilingual methods can be considered a variation of community language learning (CLL) method as it also involves utilizing L1 to give meaning to L2 and it involves using the whole sentences to serve the purpose. However, it technically utilizes ‘interpretation’ rather than ‘translation’ for the transference of meaning. This method was initially designed for assisting the English speaking children in teaching Welsh (Dodson 1985). It is a four step process which proceeds as (Dodson, 1967):

- i. teacher reads aloud a sentence in L2 several times and provides its meaning in L1
- ii. students repeat the sentence in L2 in chorus
- iii. students repeat the sentence in L2, individually
- iv. the teacher tests the students' understanding of the meaning by uttering the sentence in L1 while pointing to a picture and asking the students to reproduce the same sentence in L2

Although, this process seems similar to that of CLL, here the process is initiated by the teacher unlike that in CLL which is initiated by students' self-created L1 sentence.

CONCLUSION

Based on the arguments presented above in favour of and against the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, and in the light of research that has been conducted in native Arab environment with respect to the use of Arabic in EFL classroom, I conclude that Arabic language is a supportive tool to facilitate the learning of English as a second language. Since students in a typical EFL class in Saudi Arabia have same first language, structured use of Arabic by the teachers to impart vocabulary, grammar, meanings and idioms can be highly effective and productive, especially for low-level novice learners. Teachers should not feel guilt about resorting to L1 to conduct class activities, provide performance feedback to students, promote collaborative learning, explained instructions, promote interaction in the classroom, motivate the students, and to build reputation with the students at a personal level.

The first language can be deliberately and systematically used in the classroom to create a natural bilingual environment in which bilingual people undergo code switching within and between sentences. It should be realized that the two languages are not separate in the mind of the learner, so it is not entirely logical to keep L1 and L2 separate in classrooms either. It should be realized that code switching between two languages is a sophisticated and highly intelligent mechanism and it should not be discouraged merely to imitate the native speakers of second language. Furthermore, in native Arab setting, students of L2 utilize L1 to mediate their learning, understand difficult words, collaborate in a group work, and instruct their colleagues to enhance the productivity of a certain task performed in L2 (Machaal, 2012). Such code switching by the L2 learners can be utilized by the teachers to their advantage by adopting various second language teaching methods that make use of L1 such as New Concurrent Method, Dodson's Bilingual Method, and Community Language Learning method that link L2 with L1 the way it is present in the minds of the learners.

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