

Functions of L1 Use in EFL Classes: Students' Observations

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Abstract

This study aims to identify functions (Note 1) of teachers' first language (L1) use in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in public schools in Jordan based on students' observations. The questionnaire items were selected based on the most common uses of L1 in second language (L2) classrooms as identified in the literature. The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' observations to identify functions of EFL teachers' L1 in English classes. The participants were 104 EFL students in Grades 10 and 11 in four Jordanian public schools. Participants' responses to the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively using SPSS, a statistical software package. The study found that the students observed that their teachers shared their L1 with them in English classes to: 1) Explain complex grammar points, 2) Define some new vocabulary items, 3) Explain difficult concepts or ideas, 4) Give instructions, 5) Praise the students, 6) Translate the reading texts, and 7) Explain the similarities and differences between Arabic and English in terms of grammar, structure or pronunciation. However, the students did not observe that their teachers used the L1 in order to maintain discipline in the class as previous studies have found. The findings suggest that teachers' L1 use in the L2 classroom may indicate the usefulness of this practice and call to license EFL teachers to use their L1 in English classes in public school in Jordan and other similar EFL contexts.

Keywords: L1 use, EFL classes, Jordanian public schools

1. Introduction

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, applied linguists began to note the positive role of L1 use in the L2 classroom. Since then, many studies (e.g., Aoyama, 2020; Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Chavez, 2016; Cook, 2001; Kocaman & Aslan, 2018; Littlewood & Yu, 2011;

Lucas, T., & Katz, A. 1994; Pacheco, 2018; Polio & Duff, 1994; Turnbull, 2001; Shvidko, 2017) have examined this issue from different perspectives. Some studies (e.g., Bruen & Kelly, 2017; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002; Sali, 2014) have investigated teachers' functions of L1 use while others (e.g., Aoyama, 2020; Sampson, 2012; Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) examined functions of students' L1 use. Several studies also (e.g., Al Nofaie, 2010; Shuchi & Islam, 2016; Tsagari & Diakou, 2015) explored teachers' and/or students' attitudes toward the L1 role in the L2 classroom. Results from most of these studies show that both teachers and students have positive attitudes toward the role of L1 in the L2 classroom because it can help achieve pedagogical functions, such as defining new vocabulary items or explaining complex grammar lessons—both of which enhance the L2 teaching and learning process (Debreli & Oyman, 2016; Sharma, 2006; Tang, 2002).

However, a review of existing literature on L1 use in the L2 classroom shows that little research has been conducted on students' than on teachers' observations of L1 use (Debreli & Oyman, 2016). This lack of research is particularly notable in foreign language (FL) contexts such as Jordan, where Arabic is the official language of the country and English is taught as a foreign language in all private and public schools from Grade 1 to 12 (Alhabahba, Pandian & Mahfoodh, 2016; Swaie, 2019). Hence, this study looks at students' observations on the role of L1 in the L2 classroom in an attempt to identify functions of L1 use by teachers in EFL classes in public schools in Jordan. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following question:

What are the functions of teachers' L1 use in the English classes in Jordanian public schools?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Functions of L1 Use in the L2 Classroom

Several studies (see, for example, Alrabah, Alotaibi & Aldaihani, 2016; Alshehri, 2017; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Ma, 2019; Polio & Duff, 1994; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002; Tang, 2002) have focused on identifying functions of L1 use and how they serve the L2 teaching and learning process. Of these, some studies (e.g., Alrabah, Alotaibi & Aldaihani, 2016; Alshehri, 2017; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Lasagabaster, 2013) explored the outcomes that teachers achieved by using the L1 in the L2 classroom, while others (e.g., Aoyama, 2020; Sampson, 2012; Storch & Aldosari, 2010) investigated students' reasons for sharing their L1 among each other in group or pair work.

Overall, studies vary in terms of the number and type of functions examined and identified. For example, Forman (2012) found that there are six functions of L1 teachers' talk, whereas De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) identified 14 such functions. The same was evident in studies that focused on L2 learners' functions of L1 use: Ma (2019) reported three functions achieved by L2 learners, while Storch and Aldosari (2010) identified five. These differences in findings are presumably related to differences in settings, participants, students' proficiency level, and instruments for data collection, methods of data analysis, and other circumstances. Nevertheless, these studies concluded that using the L1 in L2 classrooms can be an effective tool in certain situations to overcome some L2 teaching and learning challenges, and can serve many different functions such as comprehension check, translation, and giving

instructions. It is also worth noting that, in the literature, the functions of using L1 by teachers are different from students' functions.

2.2 Functions of Teachers' L1 Use

Many studies (e.g., Al-Hadhrami, 2008; Alrabah, Alotaibi & Aldaihani, 2016; Alshehri, 2017; Bruen & Kelly, 2017; Cook, 2001; Forman, 2012; Sali, 2014) have observed that teachers resort to their L1 to achieve purposes that may be difficult to achieve through the sole use of the L2. For example, in the EFL context of Thailand, Forman (2012) reported six pedagogical functions (i.e., animating, translating, explaining, creating, prompting & dialoguing) of teacher talk across both L1 and L2 in EFL environments. Forman's study shows how bilingual teacher talk represents a default pedagogy in this EFL context, and how L1 use serves as a resource for embedding new forms and meanings from the L2.

Another example from the EFL context of Turkey, Sali (2014) conducted a study in which he identified three pedagogical functions of teachers' L1 use in EFL classes in secondary schools: 1) Academic function to communicate the content of the lesson 2) Managerial function to regulate the classroom interactions and proceedings efficiently, and 3) Social/cultural function to establishing rapport with the students. The results demonstrated that L1 use in EFL classes serve many pedagogical functions which facilitate and increase interactions in the classroom.

In the Arab World, Al-Hadhrami (2008), investigated EFL teachers' perspectives in Saudi Arabia for their L1 use in their English classes. The study found that teachers primarily used their L1 for the translation of new ideas, concepts, and vocabularies. They also used it to give instructions and manage the classroom more efficiently. Such findings lend support to Auerbach's (1993) proposition that "when the native language is used, practitioners, researchers, and learners consistently report positive results" (p.18). In other words, teachers find that sharing L1 with their students can create a more productive learning environment in a challenging milieu.

Furthermore, the productive role of L1 in the L2 classroom is not limited to FL contexts, but it extends to second language (SL) contexts. In an English as a second language (ESL) context, Baker (2011) noted four potential advantages of practicing L1 use in the L2 classroom: 1) it helps learners to gain deeper and fuller understandings of the subject matter; 2) it enables learners to develop their weaker language; 3) it increases home-school cooperation because of the dual use of languages; and 4) it increases the integration of fluent learners with low-proficiency learners. Garc á, Johnson, Seltzer, and Valdés (2017) also suggested four pedagogical purposes: 1) supporting learners to engage in class and comprehend the subject matter; 2) enabling learners to develop linguistic practices for academic contexts; 3) creating a space for learners' bilingualism; and 4) supporting social-emotional and bilingual identity development.

In closing, we notice that most studies in the literature assert that the role of L1 in the L2 classroom, in both FL and SL contexts, can be very beneficial and can enhance L2 teaching and learning. The role of L1 allows more flexibility and creates a very motivated learning

milieu in the L2 classroom by allowing students who are struggling in L2 learning to switch to their L1 and participate in the class activities (Baker, 2011; Garc á & Kleifgen, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in four public schools in Jordan. One hundred and four students from Grades 10 and 11 participated in filling out a questionnaire (Note 2). Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of student-participants (n=104)

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>
Grade 10	0	56
Grade 11	23	25

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using a questionnaire includes eight statements about common purposes of teachers' L1 use in the L2 classroom, adopted and modified from previous studies as shown in Table 2. The students were asked to identify how frequent their teachers use each one of the listed purposes and indicate the option that best described their observations on a scale of six options (i.e., Always, Usually, Often, Occasionally, Rarely, Never).

Table 2. Source for questionnaire items

<i>"My English language teachers use Arabic in the English language Source class to:"</i>	
Explain complex grammar points	Sharma (2006)
Help define some new vocabulary items	Sharma (2006)
Explain difficult concepts or ideas	Sharma (2006)
Give instructions	Sharma (2006)
Praise the students	Mohebbi and Alavi (2014)
Translate the reading texts	Lucas and Katz (1994)
Maintain discipline in the class	Mohebbi and Alavi (2014)
Explain the similarities and differences between Arabic and English	Al-Nofaie (2010)
in terms of grammar or structure or pronunciation.	

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software package. Every item in the questionnaire was tabulated as a percentage and mean value in order to understand the meaning of the data gathered. The first three options (i.e., Always, Usually, Often) were considered indicative of the participant's agreement to the statement whereas the other three options (Occasionally, Rarely, Never) were regarded as indicative of their disagreement. Table 3 shows the value of each option in the questionnaire.

Table 3. Value of questionnaire options

<i>Option</i>	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Often	Usually	Always
<i>Value</i>	0	1	2	3	4	5

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings regarding students' observations about the functions of L1 uses in the L2 classroom show that the majority of students thought that their teachers revert to using L1 in order to 1) Explain complex grammar points, 2) Help defining some new vocabulary items, 3) Explain difficult concepts or ideas, 4) give instructions, 5) Praise the students, 6) Translate the reading texts, 7) Explain the similarities and differences between Arabic and English in terms of grammar or structure or pronunciation. However, students did not think that maintaining discipline in the class is one of the teachers' L1 uses in the L2 classroom as previous studies have found. Table 4 shows the results of students' responses regarding their teachers' purposes of L1 during L2 lessons.

Table 4. The teachers' functions of L1 use (N=104) (Note 3)

<i>Teachers' L1 functions in the L2 classroom</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Always</i> <i>N (%)</i>	<i>Usually</i> <i>N (%)</i>	<i>Often</i> <i>N (%)</i>	<i>Occasionally</i> <i>N (%)</i>	<i>Rarely</i> <i>N (%)</i>	<i>Never</i> <i>N (%)</i>
1. Explain complex grammar points	3.46	28 (26.9)	36 (34.6)	12 (11.5)	13 (12.5)	14 (13.5)	1 (1)
2. Help define some new vocabulary items	3.60	28 (26.9)	37 (35.6)	16 (15.4)	17 (16.3)	4 (3.8)	2 (1.9)
3. Explain difficult concepts or ideas	3.73	32 (30.8)	32 (30.8)	23 (22.1)	14 (13.5)	3 (2.9)	0
4. Give instructions	2.96	15 (14.4)	33 (31.7)	20 (19.2)	13 (12.5)	15 (14.4)	8 (7.7)
5. Praise the students	2.67	17 (16.3)	23 (22.1)	18 (17.3)	18 (17.3)	11 (10.6)	17 (16.3)
6. Translate the reading texts	2.63	14 (13.5)	25 (24)	20 (19.2)	14 (13.5)	16 (15.4)	15 (14.4)
7. Maintain discipline in the class	2.35	18 (17.3)	15 (14.4)	12 (11.5)	20 (19.2)	18 (17.3)	21 (20.2)
8. To explain the similarities and differences between Arabic and English in terms of Grammar, structure, or pronunciation	3.19	25 (24)	27 (26)	16 (15.4)	18 (17.3)	15 (14.4)	3 (2.9)

Most students' answers were *always*, *usually*, or *often* for most items except Question 7. For Question 7, *maintaining discipline in the class*, a small majority (56.7%) of students felt this was an infrequent function.

With respect to mean values, Questions 1 (3.46), 2 (3.60), 3 (3.73), and 8 (3.19) show that the tendency among the participants was to give answers between *often* and *usually*. In Question 4, the mean was 2.96, which indicates that the participants' answers averaged *often*. In addition, the mode (the most common answer) of Question 4 was 4 (Usually) which indicates the tendency of

the participants to agree with the statement. In the case of Questions 5 (2.67) and 6 (2.63), the mean shows that the tendency among the participants was to answer *often*, as the mean of each item was higher than 2.5, and the mode value of each one was 4 (Usually) which confirms that the tendency of the participants was to agree with the statement. For Question 7, the mean was 2.35 which indicate that the tendency among the participants was to give the answer *occasionally*, as the mean is less than 2.5 which indicates that the tendency of the participants was to disagree with the statement.

The mean values of the questionnaire items indicate that teachers' L1 use in EFL classes in public schools in Jordan comes for different functions such as explaining grammar or giving instructions. These functions, except maintain discipline in the class, were also reported in previous studies (see, for example, Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Sharma, 2006). However, the study found that students did not think that their teachers use Arabic in order to maintain the discipline in the classroom which is different from was reported in previous studies (e.g., Lasagabaster, 2013; Littlewood & Yu, 2011) in the literature. This finding may be related to the fact that these students were in higher grades (10 & 11), and thus require less discipline than younger classes. Another possibility is that perhaps classroom discipline is not a significant issue in EFL classes. In addition, two schools in which the study was conducted were considered prestigious in the area. One of the four schools is considered to be highest-ranking school of the area, and its students mostly considered "elite" (44% of questionnaire participants were students at this school).

The results indicate that teachers' L1 use in Jordanian public schools is not random or haphazard, but is purposely used to overcome some learning challenges and create a motivated learning environment. Particularly, it was noted that EFL students often lack the intrinsic motivation to learn an L2 (Krieger, 2012).

The results highlight the dynamic role of Arabic language and its functions in enhancing the L2 learning process in English classes in public schools in Jordan due to the challenging educational reality of schools. These functions enhance the L2 learning process in public schools. Specifically, the majority of Jordanian students in public schools and similar EFL context have low-level English proficiency because they do not usually practice the target language outside the classroom, and they do not experience it in their daily lives (Swaie, 2019). The assigned time for English classes is also very limited in the public schools; it varies between 4-6 classes weekly for 45 minutes each class which do not offer students enough exposure to the English language. These reasons make mastering English language by students an insurmountable challenge and make monolingual instructions impossible to be implemented in such milieu. Thus, the role of L1 in the EFL classes in such environments is very positive and fruitful because it serves many functions (i.e., translation, explaining difficult concepts or ideas, giving instructions ...etc.) that enhance the EFL teaching and learning and help teachers to achieve the ultimate goal of lessons.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate Jordanian EFL students' observations regarding the functions of L1 uses by their teachers. A Likert-type scale questionnaire was used to elicit students'

observations on eight statements, where each statement referred to an L1 usage. Results suggested that students think that their teachers revert to use the L1 in different seven situations (i.e., explaining grammar, defining new vocabularies, explaining difficult concepts and ideas, giving instructions, praising the students, translating the reading texts, explaining the similarities and differences between Arabic and English). However, majority of students do not think that maintain discipline in the classroom is one of L1 uses of their teachers.

The role of L1 in English classes has a profound influence on successful of the EFL learning process and the findings of the study demonstrated the most popular functions are achieved by using L1. These functions maximizing students' comprehension and engaging in the class activities as well as creating a motivated learning environment. Thus, the study call to License the teacher to use their L1 in English classes in public school in Jordan and the similar EFL contexts although it did not investigate the effect of the teaching policy on the L1 use in the English classes.

This study was limited because it relied on a stand-alone questionnaire to investigate students' observations regarding the uses of the L1 of their teachers; follow-up interviews with participating students would have resulted in deeper insights into their beliefs about the issue at hand. The number of participants was also limited; exploring greater number of students may give different results particularly nearly half of the participants were considered elites.

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Notes

Note 1. “Functions”, in this work, refers to the purposes or reasons or benefits for switching to an L1 in the English classes.

Note 2. The original study was designed to include students of Grades 11 and 12 since these grades represent the secondary stage in the schooling-system of Jordan. However, the Grade 12 students had finished classes by the time the study was conducted because they were preparing for the national exam (Tawjihi) in June. Consequently, the study was changed to include students in Grade 10 instead of Grade 12.

Note 3. The mode value of item 7 is 0 (never) while for the rest of items it is 4 (usually)

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