The Impact of Using L1 Pedagogical Practices in English as Foreign Language (EFL) Classrooms: A Case Study of Emhimmed Ben Ebrahem Secondary School Teachers

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أثر استخدام الممارسات التربوية L1 في الفصول الدراسية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL): دراسة حالة لمعلمي مدرسة إمحمد بن إبراهيم الثانوية

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the influence of employing students' first language, Arabic, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at Emhemmed Ben Ebrahem Secondary School. This study fills a gap in context-specific knowledge, especially in areas like Libya, which have not been studied enough, while there are still debates about the role of L1 in L2 learning. The research examines the impact of L1 on pedagogical practices, student engagement, and language learning outcomes from the viewpoints of teachers. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with five EFL teachers and non-participant classroom observations. Thematic analysis indicated that the strategic utilisation of L1 functioned as a scaffolding mechanism for elucidating intricate grammar and vocabulary, thereby enhancing comprehension and engagement; L1 alleviated anxiety, cultivating a conducive atmosphere for risk-taking in L2 communication; and excessive dependence on Arabic sometimes obstructed immersive language practice, underscoring the conflict between accessibility and target-language proficiency. Teachers were unsure about L1's usefulness, but they stressed the need to put English first because of institutional pressures. The study highlights the sociocultural significance of L1 in Libya's educational context, where minimal extracurricular engagement with English intensifies reliance on Arabic in the classroom. The implications indicate the necessity for organised guidelines on balanced L1 utilisation, professional development for educators, and policy reforms to align communicative objectives with localised pedagogical contexts. This research enhances global EFL discourse by promoting context-responsive strategies that utilise L1 as a support mechanism without hindering L2 acquisition.

Keywords: L1 use, qualitative research, Libyan Secondary school, bilingual pedagogy.

الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة النوعية في تأثير توظيف اللغة الأولى للطلاب، العربية، في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في مدرسة محمد بن إبراهيم الثانوية. تسد هذه الدراسة فجوة في المعرفة المرتبطة بالسياق، خاصة في مناطق مثل ليبيا، التي لم يتم دراستها بما فيه الكفاية، بينما لا تزال هناك نقاشات حول دور اللغة الأولى (L1) في تعلم اللغة الثانية (L2). تدرس هذه الأبحاث تأثير اللغة الأولى على الممارسات التعليمية، ومشاركة الطلاب، ونتائج تعلم اللغة من وجهات نظر المعلمين. تم جمع البيانات من خلال مقابلات شبه مهيكلة مع خمسة معلمي لغة إنجليزية، وملاحظات صفية غير مشاركة. أظهر التحليل الموضوعاتي أن الاستخدام الاستراتيجي للغة الأولى عمل كآلية دعم لشرح القواعد والمفردات المعقدة، مما عزز الفهم والمشاركة؛ كما خففت اللغة الأولى من القلق، ووفرت بيئة مناسبة للمجازفة في التواصل باللغة الثانية؛ بينما كان الاعتماد المفرط على العربية أحياناً يعيق الممارسة اللغوية الغامرة، مما يبرز الصراع بين سهولة الوصول وكفاءة اللغة الهدف. كان المعلمون غير متأكدين من فائدة اللغة الأولى، لكنهم شددوا على ضرورة إعطاء الأولوية للغة الإنجليزية بسبب الضغوط المؤسسية.

تُبرز الدراسة الأهمية الاجتماعية والثقافية للغة الأولى في السياق التعليمي الليبي، حيث إن قلة الانخراط في الأنشطة اللاصفية المتعلقة بالإنجليزية تزيد من الاعتماد على العربية داخل الصف. وتشير النتائج إلى ضرورة وجود إرشادات منظمة حول الاستخدام المتوازن للغة الأولى، والتطوير المهني للمعلمين، وإصلاح السياسات لتتماشى مع الأهداف التواصلية والسياقات التربوية المحلية. تُعزز هذه الأبحاث الخطاب العالمي لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من خلال تعزيز استراتيجيات تستجيب للسياق وتستفيد من اللغة الأولى كآلية دعم دون أن تعيق اكتساب اللغة الثانية.

الكلمات الدالة: استخدام اللغة الأولى (L1)، البحث النوعي، المدرسة الثانوية الليبية، التربية ثنائية اللغة.

Introduction

It has been controversial to use a learner's first language (L1) in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Over-reliance on L1 can limit exposure to English, but when used wisely, it can help with learning. The use of the native language (L1) in foreign language (L2) classrooms has been investigated from a variety of perspectives, and it has been determined that L1 use is an essential component of L2 instruction (Hall & Cook, 2012).

More research is needed to examine teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding their use of L1 and L2 in different educational contexts, even though it is advised that language teachers use L1 sparingly to aid students in learning L2 (Shin et al., 2019). This study looks at the various roles that L1 plays in EFL classes. L1 Cognitive Bridge serves three primary purposes: association, translation, and comprehension. To assist beginners in understanding complex grammar or vocabulary, L1 employs mental translation. When teachers use L1 to explain cultural idioms, pragmatics, or subtleties that learners might not understand, they are bridging cultural gaps and promoting positive language transfer. Additionally, using L1 reduces anxiety, fosters a supportive environment, and clarifies instructions—especially for younger students. Self-assurance and drive: By reducing affective filters, limited L1 usage encourages involvement.

Learners may express their ideas in L1 before attempting English. L1 ensures that students understand the test requirements even though responses must be in English. Grammar-Translation Method vs. Communicative Approach: The former relies on L1, whereas the latter emphasizes immersion in English. Beginners benefit more from L1 assistance, while advanced learners require less. While adults may use L1 metacognitively, children need immersive environments.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the role and impact of Arabic, the students' first language, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class at Emhemmed Ben Ebrahem Secondary School. The study's specific objectives are to:

1. Examine how teachers strategically use L1 to enhance learning outcomes, comprehension, and participation in EFL instruction.
2. Assess the potential benefits and challenges of L1 integration, particularly in cases where students are not exposed to English outside of the classroom.
3. The goal of the study is to contribute to the broader discussion regarding bilingual education in EFL settings.

Research Questions

1. What pedagogical arguments support Libyan EFL teachers' deliberate use of Arabic L1 in their lessons?

2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of using L1 in EFL instruction in Libya?

Literature Review

The role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) schools has been a topic of much discussion in applied linguistics. Views range from rigid monolingual approaches to more flexible, context-sensitive bilingual pedagogies. The use of L1 as a tool for describing grammar and vocabulary was previously normalized by methods that placed an emphasis on accuracy over fluency, such as the Grammar-Translation Method (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late 20th century, which framed L1 as a barrier to real language acquisition, the paradigm shifted towards immersive, L2-only environments (Cook, 2001). CLT proponents argued that decreasing L1 exposure would speed up fluency by mimicking naturalistic language learning environments. This perspective, however, has drawn criticism for neglecting to consider the sociocultural and cognitive complexity of classroom settings, particularly in situations where students are not exposed to the target language much more.

More and more recent research supports a well-rounded strategy, acknowledging L1 as a teaching tool rather than a crutch. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) asserts that L1 acts as a mediator, filling in the gaps between learners' prior knowledge and novel L2 concepts. In L2 tasks, Antón and DiCamilla (1998) showed how L1 promotes cooperative problem-solving, allowing students to co-construct understanding through "other-regulation." Likewise, bilingualism is reframed as a dynamic practice by translanguaging theory (García, 2009), in which L1 and L2 coexist as complementary resources rather than rival systems.

Cummins' (2007) Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) hypothesis, which maintains that metalinguistic skills transcend linguistic boundaries and enhance general cognitive and academic development, lends more credence to this viewpoint. Affective factors also play a major role in the rationale for strategic L1 use. Language anxiety is a well-known barrier to second language acquisition, and it is particularly problematic in low-proficiency settings where students may feel overburdened by intensive instruction (Horwitz, 2001).

Macaro (2001) found that judicious L1 use reduces anxiety, creating a "safe space" for learners to take risks and participate actively. This is particularly true in places like Libya, where a lack of exposure to English in society increases the reliance on Arabic in the classroom. However, detractors warn that relying too much on L1 can hinder learners' ability to communicate by denying them necessary L2 input (Hall & Cook, 2012). Teachers frequently find it difficult to strike a balance between institutional requirements for L2 immersion and students' comprehension needs, which results in ambivalence and inconsistent practices, according to Hall and Cook's (2012) global survey of language policies. Monolingual societies like Libya, where Arabic is the primary language of daily life and English is viewed as a foreign language rather than a second language, exacerbate these tensions. The cultural and religious importance of Arabic in the Arab world makes the role of L1 in EFL classes even more complex.

Despite institutional pressure to prioritise English, studies conducted in Egypt, for example, show that teachers still rely on Arabic to explain complex grammar and manage classroom dynamics (Abdel Latif, 2018). Teachers frequently use Arabic as a code-switch to

explain abstract ideas that don't have direct Arabic equivalents, such as phrasal verbs or tense systems, according to Abdel Latif (2018).

In a similar spirit, Alshammari's (2015) study in Saudi Arabia discovered that while students expressed concerns about having fewer opportunities to practise their English, they also believed that Arabic explanations were crucial to their comprehension. Strategic L1 use was linked to higher student engagement in Tunisia, according to Ben Hamad (2020), particularly in mixed-proficiency classrooms where students struggled with English-only instruction. The following themes emerge from these regional studies: L1 serves as a scaffold for emotion and thought, but if unchecked, it can result in dependence.

Additionally, as educators balance the conflicts between linguistic pragmatism and cultural preservation, sociopolitical opposition to perceived "Westernisation" through English-only policies (Phillipson, 1992) makes pedagogical decisions even more difficult. These difficulties are exacerbated by Libya's distinct sociolinguistic and educational environment. Political unrest since 2011 has made systemic problems like out-of-date curricula, inadequate teacher preparation, and resource shortages worse (Assalahi, 2020). Debates concerning the effectiveness of education were sparked by a Ministry of Education report that showed 72% of Libyan secondary students performed below proficiency benchmarks on English exit exams.

Orafi (2013) ascribes these results to Libya's low levels of extracurricular English exposure, in contrast to Gulf nations where English has become more prevalent in society as a result of globalisation. English is viewed as a foreign language rather than a communication tool in Libya, where Arabic continues to be the primary language of instruction and cultural identity (Farhat, 2019). Benyahia and Abdulkhaliq (2015) discovered that many Libyan EFL teachers lack confidence in their English proficiency, which results in an overreliance on Arabic for instruction. This sociocultural dynamic is further exacerbated by the teachers' own linguistic limitations. These results are consistent with Phillipson's (1992) criticism of linguistic imperialism, which holds that in underfunded educational systems, a reliance on L1 is sustained by the unequal power relations between English and regional languages.

There are still important gaps in the literature despite the growing support for bilingual pedagogies around the world. First, most studies ignore monolingual contexts like Libya, where L1 is both a cultural cornerstone and a pedagogical necessity, in favors of concentrating on multilingual societies (such as South Africa and India). Second, very little research examines how institutional limitations like strict curricula or exam systems influence L1/L2 choices, despite the fact that teacher practices are widely documented. Third, there is still a lack of representation of student viewpoints, especially in Arab settings where the hierarchical nature of the classroom may prevent candid criticism. The need for localized research is further underscored by Libya's unique challenges, which include political instability, resource scarcity, and cultural resistance to English. By filling these gaps, this study offers useful insights for EFL contexts with limited resources while also adding to larger discussions on bilingual pedagogy.

Methodology
Research Design

In order to examine the function of L1 (Arabic) in Emhemmed Ben Ebrahem Secondary School Alkhoms Libya EFL, this study used a qualitative exploratory approach. To document

the lived experiences and highlight how L1 influences instructional strategies and learning objectives, a phenomenological design was used.

Participants

Five EFL teachers with five years of teaching experience from Emhemmed Ben Ebrahem public secondary schools in Alkhoms, Libya, participated. participated in advanced EFL courses with a range of skill levels. The sociolinguistic context of Libya was reflected in the fact that all participants were fluent Arabic speakers with little exposure to English outside of the classroom.

Data Collection

Semi-structured Interviews: All five EFL teachers participated in one-on-one, 20–25 minute interviews. Their L1 usage strategies, perceived advantages and disadvantages, emotional reactions to code-switching, and the ways in which institutional pressures influenced their language practices were all examined in the interviews. To encourage in-depth contemplation and unique viewpoints, the questions were left open-ended.

Classroom Observations were taken over a two-week period, classroom observations were conducted in addition to interviews. Throughout several sessions, each teacher was observed teaching a range of subject areas (e.g., grammar, speaking, vocabulary). Code-switching patterns, classroom dynamics, student reactions, and instances of L1 use were all documented in field notes. How and when Arabic was introduced—whether to manage behaviour, explain grammar, clarify instructions, or assist less proficient students—was given special consideration. Consistent patterns were found in the observations, including higher student engagement during Arabic interjections and the use of L1 by teachers for challenging assignments. In addition to highlighting the lived realities of striking a balance between pedagogical pragmatism and English immersion, these sessions offered contextual validation of the interview data.

Thematic Analysis

The meaning of the interviews was preserved through audio recording, transcription, and English translation. Emergent themes were found using inductive coding.

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity was prioritised when obtaining informed consent (teachers' pseudonyms were T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5). Participants could leave at any time, and data confidentiality was upheld.

Discussion

The results of this study shed light on the intricate and contradictory function of Arabic L1 in Libyan EFL classes, providing important new understandings of the interaction between affective dynamics, systemic limitations, and pedagogical pragmatism. Fundamentally, the strategic use of L1 is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, serving as a mediating instrument to close the gap between learners' preexisting knowledge and the requirements of L2 acquisition. The use of Arabic by teachers to explain abstract grammatical concepts (such as phrasal verbs and tense systems) highlights the language's value as a scaffold that allows students to move through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) using culturally familiar reference points. This supports the claim made by Antón and DiCamilla

(1998) that L1 promotes group problem-solving in L2 assignments, a phenomenon seen in Libyan classrooms where Arabic explanations converted misunderstanding into understanding.

Though L1 is a cognitive lifeline, the study also identifies a paradox: excessive use of it could jeopardise the immersive language practice necessary to build communicative competence. Hall and Cook (2012) draw attention to this tension, pointing out that excessive code-switching may limit L2 input, especially in situations like Libya where there is little extracurricular exposure to English. Teachers' ambivalence—recognizing the importance of Arabic while complaining about institutional pressure to emphasise English—reflects a larger systemic failure to balance policy mandates with pedagogical flexibility, a problem made worse by out-of-date curricula and inadequate teacher preparation (Assalahi, 2020).

This balance is made more difficult by the affective benefits of L1 use. Teachers always stressed that Arabic was an emotional bridge as well as a cognitive tool. "When I see students' faces full of confusion, one Arabic sentence can change everything—they suddenly relax and engage," for example, T1 explained. This is in line with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which holds that language acquisition depends on reducing emotional barriers. "Some students are too shy to speak English," T4 continued. However, they will have the confidence to try in English if I first allow them to explain in Arabic." These feelings demonstrate how L1 establishes a "safe zone" where students, particularly those with low proficiency, can engage without worrying about making mistakes.

This psychological solace could, however, have two sides. Concerned, T2 stated: "I feel stuck—if I use too much Arabic, they stop trying in English." However, many people give up if I completely avoid Arabic. A recurring theme in monolingual EFL contexts is the conflict between immersion and accessibility, which is highlighted by this ambivalence.

This problem is made worse by institutional forces. As T3 pointed out, "The tests are rife with grammar, but our curriculum expects us to speak English only. Therefore, rather than practicing communication, we wind up using Arabic to drill rules. Innovation in teaching strategies is hampered by this misalignment between policy and classroom reality. "To be honest, I wish I had better training on how to balance Arabic and English," T5 acknowledged. I sometimes use code-switching because I'm at a loss for words. whereby Arabic lowers emotional barriers to L2 engagement by acting as a psychological buffer. When teachers code-switch, students describe their classrooms as "safe spaces." This demonstrates how L1 promotes inclusivity, especially for low-proficiency learners who might otherwise disengage. However, this safety net has unforeseen repercussions.

The dependence on Arabic highlights the vulnerability of confidence developed on L1 scaffolding, as evidenced by students' annoyance with sudden exam requirements that only require English. This duality suggests a regional pattern in Arab EFL contexts, as evidenced by findings in Saudi Arabia (Alshammari, 2015) and Tunisia (Ben Hamad, 2020), where L1 similarly balanced comprehension and dependency. These difficulties are made more difficult by Libya's unique sociopolitical environment, which is characterised by instability following the revolution and cultural opposition to alleged linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). Teachers' use of Arabic to demonstrate cultural solidarity by saying, "They see I'm Libyan, like them," demonstrates how L1 goes beyond pedagogy and becomes a tool for negotiating identity politics in a country that is suspicious of Western influence.

Additionally, the study reveals structural injustices that sustain dependence on L1. Teachers' criticisms of exam systems that emphasise grammar drills over communication skills show a disconnect between the objectives of policy and the realities of the classroom. Exams

concentrate on grammar rather than communication, as T2 pointed out. Naturally, I drill rules in Arabic, highlighting how assessment frameworks influence pedagogical decisions, frequently at the price of comprehensive language development. Abdel Latif's (2018) observations in Egypt, where institutional pressures similarly distorted teaching practices, are echoed here. Additionally, a cycle of reliance on L1 is created by teachers' self-reported limitations in English proficiency, which are a result of inadequate training programs (Benyahia & Abdulkhaliq, 2015). This inhibits opportunities for immersive L2 modelling. The necessity of context-sensitive reforms is highlighted by these systemic shortcomings.

While global scholarship advocates for translanguaging (García, 2009), Libya's unique constraints demand tailored solutions and structured guidelines for L1 use, immersive teacher training, and curricula that integrate communicative activities alongside traditional grammar instruction.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the global EFL discourse by challenging one-size-fits-all monolingual paradigms and advocating for pedagogies that honor local linguistic and cultural realities. By centering the voices of Libyan teachers, it amplifies a critical, underexplored perspective in the Arab world, urging policymakers to recognize L1 not as a crutch but as a strategic asset in equitable language education. Future research could expand this dialogue by exploring rural-urban disparities, gender-specific practices, or longitudinal impacts of bilingual pedagogies in low-exposure contexts. Until then, this work stands as a call to harmonize theory with lived experience, ensuring that EFL policies empower rather than alienate learners in linguistically marginalized settings.

Conclusion

In secondary school EFL classes at Emhemmed Ben Ebrahem, Arabic L1 plays a multifaceted role. This study highlights how it can both support learning and act as a barrier to English proficiency. By combining the viewpoints of educators, the study demonstrates how the strategic use of L1 improves understanding of difficult language concepts, such as phrasal verbs and tense systems, and lowers anxiety, creating a safe space for taking risks. These results support the importance of L1 as a cognitive and affective mediator and are consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. However, the study also highlights important conflicts, such as the over-reliance on Arabic that could stifle immersive L2 practice and prolong dependency due to systemic issues like exam-driven pedagogy, outdated curricula, and inadequate teacher preparation (Assalahi, 2020; Benyahia & Abdulkhaliq, 2015).

These dynamics are heightened in the Libyan context. Arabic is positioned as both a sociocultural anchor and a pedagogical necessity due to limited extracurricular exposure to English, post-revolutionary instability, and cultural resistance to linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). A wider gap between policy requirements and classroom realities is reflected in teachers' ambivalence in using L1 for clarity while battling institutional pressure to give English priority. Although this misalignment is similar to regional trends seen in Saudi Arabia (Alshammari, 2015) and Egypt (Abdel Latif, 2018), Libya's particular problems necessitate solutions tailored to the country's circumstances.

The study promotes structured bilingual pedagogies that strategically use L1 without sacrificing L2 immersion in order to address these problems. Among the suggestions are Reforms in Policy Provide guidelines that support the prudent use of L1 to scaffold complex concepts, along with communicative activities to improve fluency teacher training. Invest in

professional development programs that give teachers the tools they need to effectively balance L1/L2 use and translanguage (García, 2009). In order to lessen the over-reliance on grammar-translation techniques, curriculum revision incorporates interactive, student-centered resources.

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of bilingual strategies in Libya, the rural-urban disparities in L1/L2 practices, and the gender-specific dynamics of code-switching in the classroom. Such enquiries will enhance comprehension of how marginalised contexts can manage the tensions between accessibility and immersion. Ultimately, this work emphasises the necessity of aligning theory with practice, guaranteeing that EFL education empowers Libyan learners rather than alienating them in their quest for English proficiency.

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