

Using Learners' First Language in EFL Classrooms

Eman Alshehri, King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the attitudes of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) towards using learners' first language (L1) in their classes. It also considers the frequency and functions of using L1 in EFL classes. Monolingual teaching and minimising the use of learners' L1 are traditionally promoted in English language teaching (ELT) research (Cook 2001, Littlewood and Yu, 2011). Recently, there has been an upsurge in research showing that L1 is actually used in EFL classes to serve different learning functions (e.g., Aurebach, 1993; Hall & Cook, 2013). Few researchers have, however, investigated use of the L1 by EFL teachers in the higher education context in an Arabic-speaking country (such as Saudi Arabia). Given the abovementioned debate in the literature, it is relevant to examine the way in which second language acquisition theories and teaching methodologies relate to teachers' attitudes towards using L1. A mixed-methods study using questionnaires and follow-up interviews was conducted to collect data from EFL teachers teaching the preparatory year at a state university in Saudi Arabia. Questionnaires were collected from about 104 EFL teachers from countries such as the USA, India and Pakistan. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' attitudes towards using L1 in EFL classes. The findings shed light on the functions of using L1 in EFL classes. They also provide insight into teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1.

Keywords: L1 use, EFL classrooms, teaching English

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Introduction

Using learners' first language (L1) is widely avoided in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes (Cook, 2001; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Hall & Cook, 2012). Since the end of the 18th century, a number of well-known English teaching methods have adopted a monolingual approach to language teaching, such as the direct method, audiolingualism, communicative language teaching, and task based language teaching. The monolingual approach discourages use of L1 through one of three approaches: banning the use of L1 in the classroom, minimizing the use of L1 in the classroom, or maximizing the use of the target language (L2) in the classroom (Cook, 2001).

The monolingual approach is supported by Krashen's (1981) theory of second language learning, in which it is argued that when learning foreign languages people follow basically the same route as they do when they acquire their mother tongue, and hence use of the mother tongue in the learning process should be minimized. Brown (1994) believes that language acquisition is a subconscious activity that can only be achieved via interaction in the L2. Another argument for maximising L2 use is that successful language acquisition depends on keeping the L2 separate from the L1 because languages form distinct systems. The rationale for this is based on transfer theories such as contrastive analysis, whereby various language systems cause negative transfers and impede L2 acquisition (Lado, 1957).

Until recently, the monolingual approach has rarely been challenged. This may have been due to several reasons. Most EFL classes used to include students who did not share a single L1, whereby the teacher did not speak the language of students (Atkinson, 1993). However, there are a wide range of classes in which this is not the case and where students and teachers share the same L1. This leads the monolingual orthodoxy to lose its appeal, and researchers have begun to find fault with L2-only theories, particularly when the L1 of the students (and sometimes the teacher) is shared (Medgyes, 1994; Auerbach, 1993). In these situations, Medgyes (1994) considers this orthodoxy 'untenable on any grounds, be they psychological, linguistic or pedagogical' (p.66) and Auerbach (1993) highlights that there could be positive reasons for using L1 in the classroom for certain purposes.

Many researchers have investigated contexts in which L1 could be used as an aid to L2 teaching (Atkinson, 1993; Aurebach, 1993; Cook, 2013; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009), including examining the areas in which L1 can be used in a supporting role when learning L2. It is reported that classroom management (including discipline, organising the class and task setting) is one such area (Aurebach, 1993; Cook, 2013; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009). Others include translation and checking meaning (Atkinson, 1993; Aurebach, 1993), understanding grammatical points, language analysis and code switching (Aurebach, 1993; Cook, 2013; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009). Some studies, aside from appearing to demonstrate that L1 use can actually assist L2 learning, have shown that L1 use can also help students in a sociocultural respect. It has been observed that L1 use can create a more cohesive and relaxed classroom environment in which students share language and cultural references with the teacher, which also clearly impacts on learning. Bhooth, Azman and Ismail (2014) highlighted that using the L1 during collaborative tasks enhances learners' language proficiency as they move through the zone of proximal development. Copland and Neokleous (2011) also noted that L1 use is useful in one-to-one interaction with the teacher,

while Nation (1990) suggested that refusing to allow students to use their shared L1 negatively impacts on them as it makes them feel that their own language is somehow lesser than the L2.

Although L1 use is discouraged in mainstream English language teaching (ELT) methods, a number of studies have shown that EFL teachers do, in fact, use L1 in the classroom (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2013). Nunan and Lamb (1996) stated that the avoidance of learner L1 is practically impossible, especially with monolingual students and with students with low-level English language proficiency. In fact, according to Cook (2001), teachers who have at least some knowledge of their students' shared mother tongue tend to use L1 in their classroom. However, when EFL teachers use L1, they often experience feelings of guilt (Copland & Neokleous, 2011) and frustration (Cianflone, 2009). At the same time, it has been suggested that EFL teachers find using L1 practical in L2 teaching (Macaro, 2001), and feel that excluding L1 for its own sake could hinder students' learning (e.g., Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012; Harbord, 1992). Studies have revealed that L1 exclusion is unnecessary; that its use can actually promote learning, providing it is used in the correct way; and that instructors do actually use L1 in their classroom (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Duff & Polio, 1990; Hall & Cook, 2013; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002).

Some studies have examined EFL teachers' use of learners' L1 and teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1 (Hall & Cook, 2013; McMillan & Rivers, 2011). However, few studies have investigated teachers' attitudes towards L1 use in relation to the practical functions of L1 use in the classroom in the context of a Saudi University, in particular in the preparatory year, with a range of native and non-native EFL teachers. Therefore, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How frequently do EFL teachers use learners' L1?
2. How frequently do students use their L1 in the EFL classroom?
3. What are teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study comprised 104 teachers, who each answered a questionnaire. Interviews were also conducted with five of these teachers. The interviewees were chosen to represent a broad range of experience, nationalities and Arabic language ability. The profile of the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

Code	Years of Experience	Nationality	Level of Spoken Arabic Ability
A	5–9	Australian	Elementary
B	10–14	Pakistani	Elementary
C	25+	Saudi	Native
D	20–24	British	N/A
E	5–9	Saudi	Native

The majority of teachers who participated in the study possessed a language-related postgraduate diploma, master's degree, or PhD. They were teaching university-level students, as the research was conducted at a state university in Saudi Arabia. The sample comprised both native and non-native EFL teachers teaching in the preparatory year, which is the first year of university. One of the main aims of the preparatory year is to improve the English level of students. In order to do this, an intensive general English language course of 18 hours per week is provided. The student level in English when starting the preparatory year varies, but if they are a beginner at the start of the preparatory year they should reach upper-intermediate level by the end of the year.

Procedure

This study adopted the mixed methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to allow provision of a breadth of information and to explore the research enquiry in depth. The 104 participants completed the survey (adopted from Hall & Cook, 2013) online during the spring of 2016. Initially, the questionnaire was piloted to five English teachers and some wordings were modified based on the teachers' feedback to facilitate clearer understanding. The final version of the questionnaire included seven multi-item Likert scale questions, including open questions that gave the participants the opportunity to add further comments and nine short background questions. Finally, the participants were asked to provide their contact details if they were willing to participate in the follow-up interviews. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire as seen from the pilot study was between 15 and 20 minutes.

The questionnaire investigated teachers' attitudes towards L1 use in the professional context; thus, it should be noted that the data represents reported, rather than actual, L1 use practices. The questionnaire covered attitudes towards the teachers' L1 use in ELT, an evaluation of the arguments for and against this, and the teachers' perceptions of general attitudes towards using L1 in ELT. It also asked about the extent to which the teachers used the learners' L1 in their class and teaching, and for what purposes.

With respect to the follow-up interviews, the main aim was to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' practices of and attitudes towards the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. Interview guidelines were developed to address the research questions pertaining to the frequency of using L1 and teachers' attitudes towards using L1 in their teaching. The interviews were semi-structured, individual, recorded, conducted in English and lasted between 10 and 15 minutes.

Data analysis

The questionnaires were analysed via SPSS 20 software and descriptive statistics were calculated for all questions. The interview data was thematically categorised using Microsoft Excel.

Results

This section details the background information of the participants. The quantitative and qualitative results for each research questions will be then provided.

Profile of participants

As shown in Figure 1, the EFL teachers participating in this study were of a number of different nationalities, with the largest group (about 40%), being Saudi. The second highest percentage (21.90%) were South Asian teachers from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. About 10% of teachers were from other Arabic countries (Egypt, Tunis, Jordan, Morocco) or the USA. There were also a number of teachers from the UK, South-East Asia, Canada, Australia and South Africa, and one teacher from Slovakia.

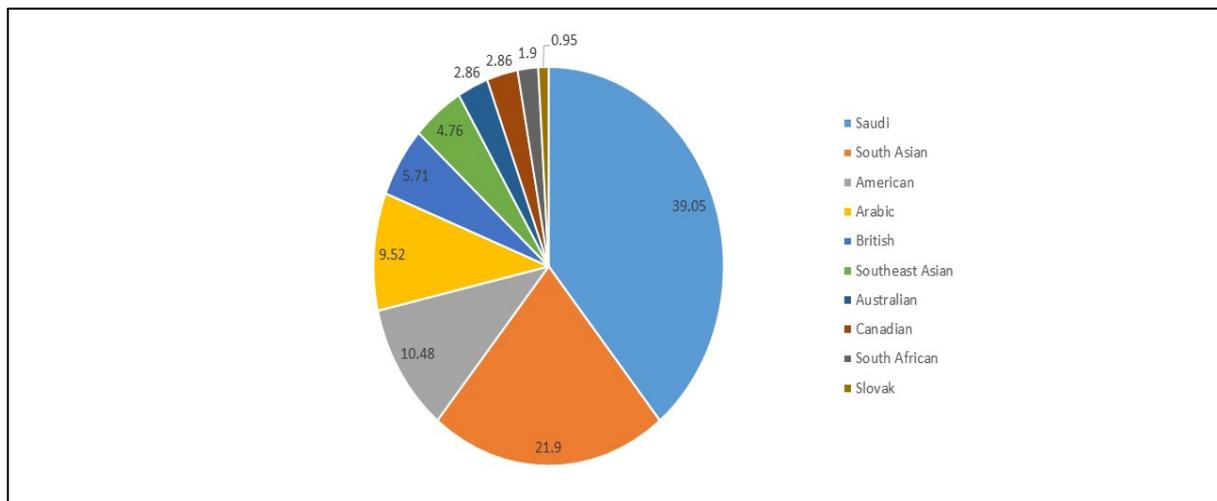


Figure 1: Teacher Nationalities (%)

Almost 50% of the EFL teachers were native Arabic speakers, while about 50% were not, as shown in Figure 2.

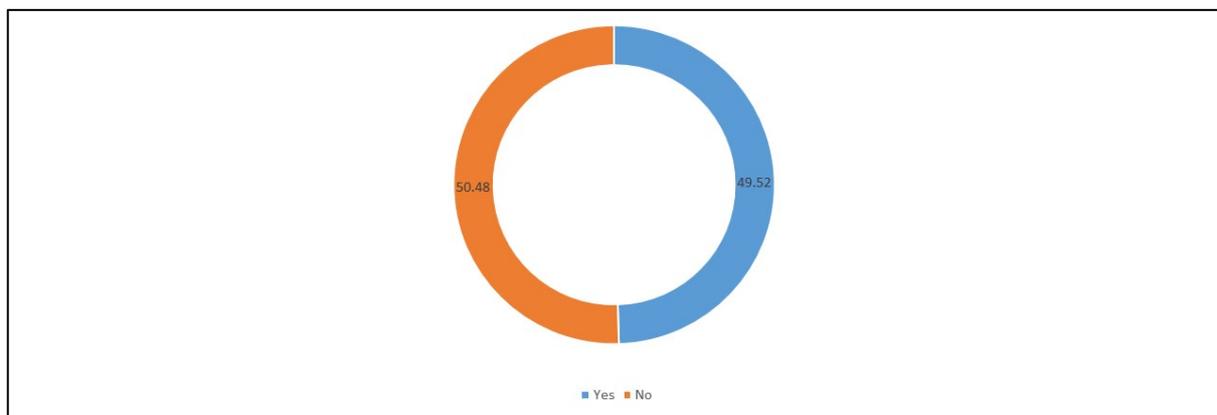


Figure 2: Is Arabic the first language of EFL teachers? (%)

RQ1: How frequently do EFL teachers use learners' L1?

According to the questionnaire results presented in Figure 3, more than half the teachers reported they never use Arabic in assessing their students, giving feedback, correcting spoken errors and giving instructions. When examining the results of ALWAYS and OFTEN options, it appears that teachers do not tend to use L1 much in their EFL classroom for any of the examined functions. However, for the option SOMETIMES the case is different, with about 30% of teachers sometimes using Arabic to explain vocabulary, develop rapport and a good classroom atmosphere, and explain unclear meanings. A number of teachers also seem to use L1 to some extent for the other functions.

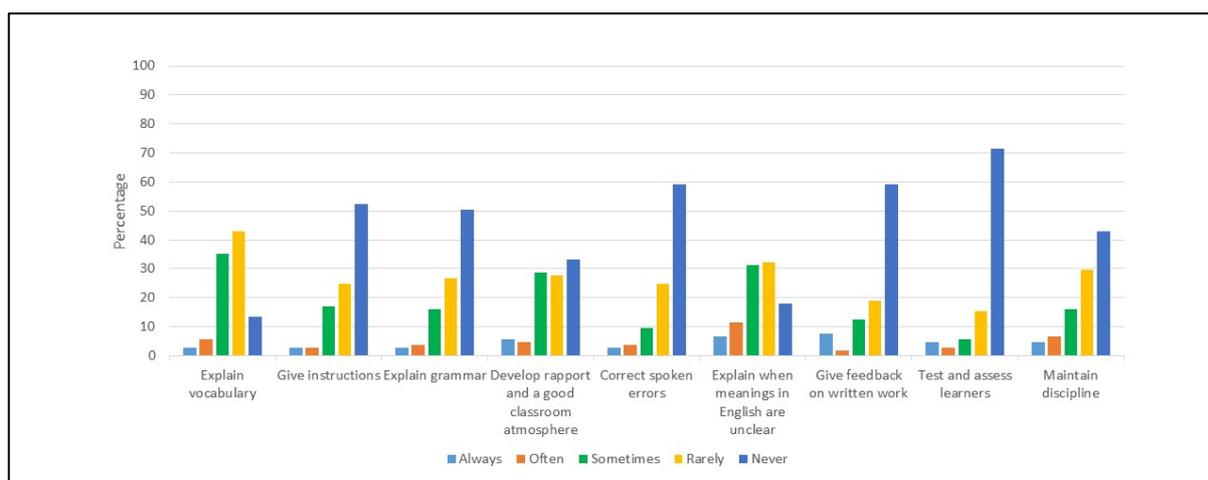


Figure 3: Frequency of L1 use by EFL teachers

During the interviews, the teachers talked about the functions of using L1 in the classroom and stated they use L1 when needed. The main area that they reported using it in was explaining vocabulary. All the teachers said they needed to use L1 for this function, which supports the results from the questionnaire as the top function for L1 was stated as for explaining vocabulary. Most teachers also reported that they used L1 directly, by first using the L2 and then translating what they had said into Arabic. One of the teachers was unable to speak Arabic and so stated that she tended to ask one of her students to translate. Another teacher was against using L1 (she is a native Arabic speaker), and reported that she never used Arabic, but that she did encourage her students to use online bilingual dictionaries to translate any vocabulary they did not understand.

Teachers also spoke about the reasons for their using L1 in their classes. All of them said that they needed to use it for beginner students who cannot understand explanations in English. Teacher B said:

'...sometimes for the vocabulary, I have to explain something and they [are] unable to understand... I try my best to [help] them to comprehend in L2...but the things is sometime we feel the need... so maybe there is one student in the class... I say what do you call it in Arabic and all of the sudden she said something in Arabic and they get the idea...[the students will realise] ok she is talking about this thing' Teacher B

RQ2: How frequently do students use their L1 in the EFL classroom?

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which L1 is used by their students. As Figure 4 shows, the survey responses suggested that students tend to use their L1 for the functions presented to teachers in the questionnaire.

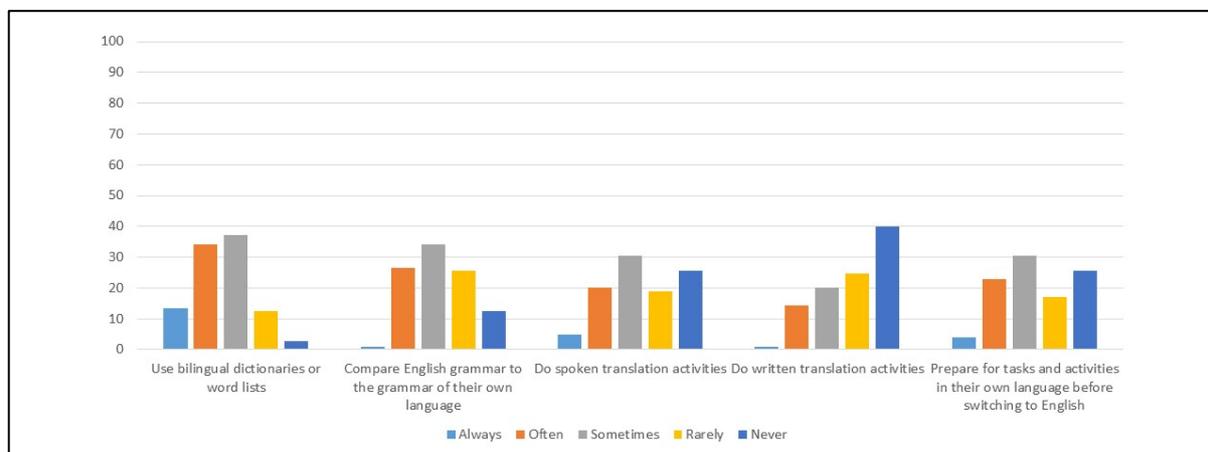


Figure 4: Frequency of L1 use by learners

The teachers reported that the majority of their students use L1 to some extent in the classroom, with the top function being for translating vocabulary using dictionaries. It was also apparent that a large percentage of students use L1 for comparing English grammar to Arabic grammar, and also to prepare certain tasks. During the interviews, the teachers confirmed the results of the questionnaire by reiterating that L1 was used to check the meaning of a word in the dictionary and to discuss tasks (for example, speaking or writing), whereby in pairs or groups they used L1 to seek clarification from their peers. Teacher A gave an example of this: *'...if I tell them do interviews... they will sit down and discuss it in Arabic... and write it in English but they will discuss it in Arabic.'*

RQ3: What are teachers' attitudes towards the use of L1?

The third research question relates to teachers' attitudes towards using L1. To examine these attitudes the questionnaire included items that examined four aspects. These aspects were teachers' general attitudes towards L1 use, teachers' evaluations of the arguments supporting L1 use, teachers' evaluations of the arguments against L1 use and teacher perceptions of ELT training in relation to L1 use. In Figures (5, 6, 7, 8) presented in this section, the blue coding relates to the levels of agreement (slightly agree, agree and strongly agree), which have been collapsed to represent an overall view of agreement. The orange sections relate to the levels of disagreement (slightly disagree, disagree and strongly disagree; also condensed).

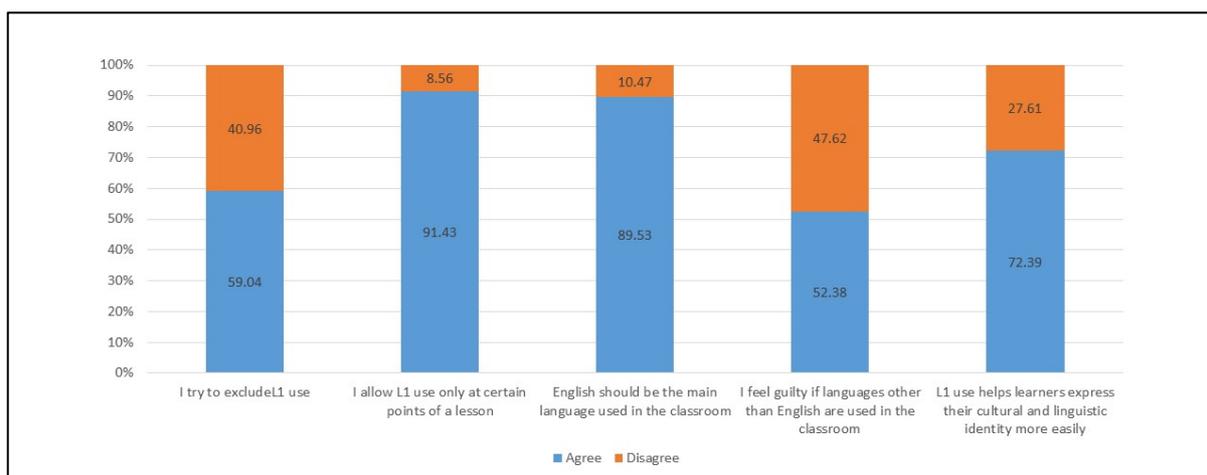


Figure 5: EFL teachers' general views of L1 use in classroom

Figure 5 represents teachers' general attitudes towards L1 use. It shows that the majority of teachers (about 90%) allow L1 use at certain points of the lesson, while at the same time about 90% of teachers think that English should be the main language used in the class. 52.38% of the teachers reported that they feel guilty when using L1 in the EFL classroom. Although almost 70% of teachers believed L1 helps their students to express their cultural and linguistic identity, 60% supported excluding L1 use in the classroom. Figure 6 shows teachers' evaluations of arguments supporting the use of L1.

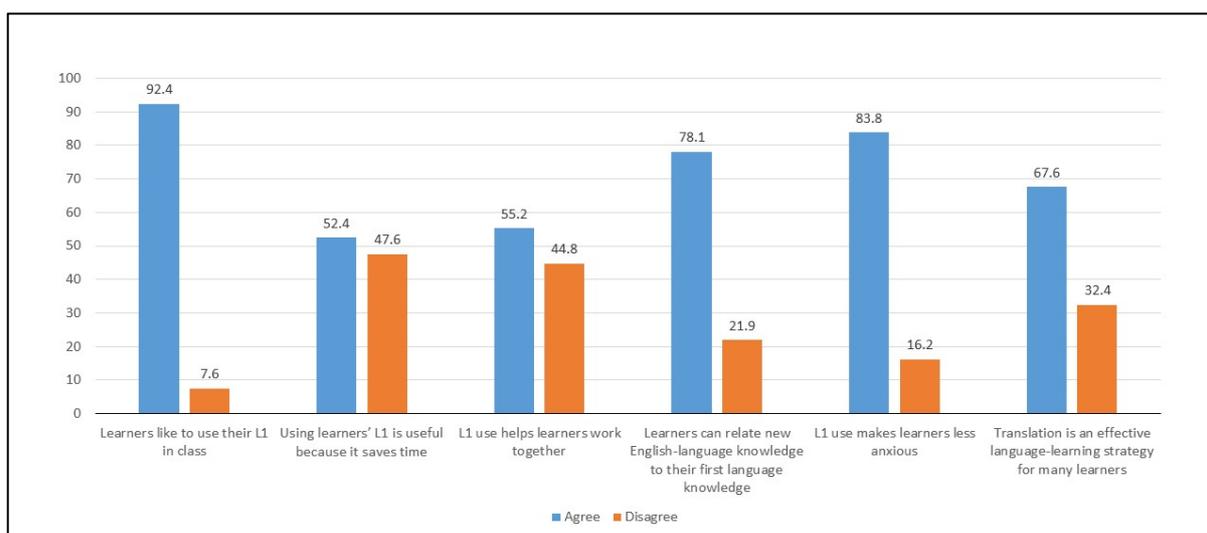


Figure 6: Teacher evaluations of arguments supporting L1 use

The data presented in Figure 6 shows that most teachers are in agreement with three points: firstly that learners like using their L1 (which has the highest percentage at 92%); secondly that L1 use reduces students' anxiety levels (83.8%), which are both emotional responses; and thirdly that students can relate new L2 knowledge to their existing L1 knowledge, such as with grammar, and make connections between the two – which relates to cognitive skill. The highest level of disagreement level was found for the second point, which pertains to using L1 to save time. It seems that teachers are more in agreement with psychological and cognitive reasons for using L1 than with practical reasons for its use, such as saving time.

Four of the teachers interviewed showed understanding of a need to use L1 at certain points during class. One teacher referred to L1 use as a natural occurrence amongst speakers with the same mother tongue. Another teacher stated her belief that it is useful for ‘*vocabulary and single words*’ (Teacher A).

Figure 7 shows teachers’ evaluations of arguments against L1 use.

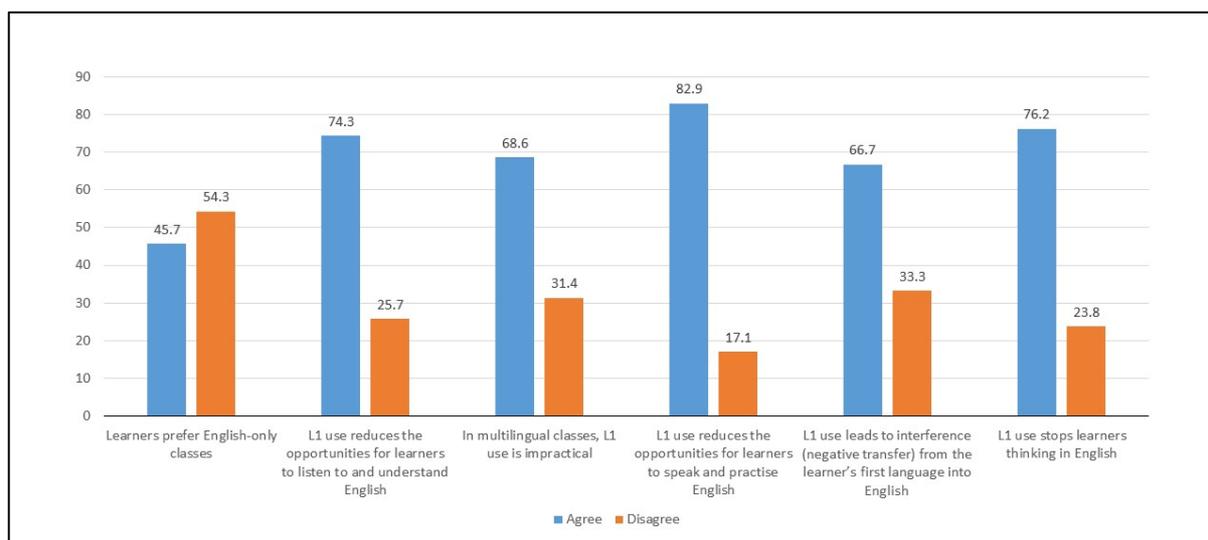


Figure 7: Teacher evaluations of arguments against L1 use

It can be seen that the majority of teachers (more than 74%) believed that using L1 reduced students’ chances to practise the L2 skills of speaking and listening, which may have a negative impact on whether they think in English. The highest disagreement level shown here was for the first point, which relates to learners’ preference to use L2 only in their classroom; 54.3% of teachers disagreed with this.

During the interviews, one teacher was against L1 use based on her belief that using English only is better for the learning outcomes of her students. She said: ‘*Actually I don’t tell them I am Saudi and I speak Arabic... for their own benefit I am doing this... we want them to learn the language... they are here to learn English.*’ (Teacher C).

The last aspect with respect to teacher attitudes is their views of ELT training in relation to L1 use. This includes items related to whether ELT training encourages or discourages L1 use and whether there is a discussion of L1 use in ELT research.

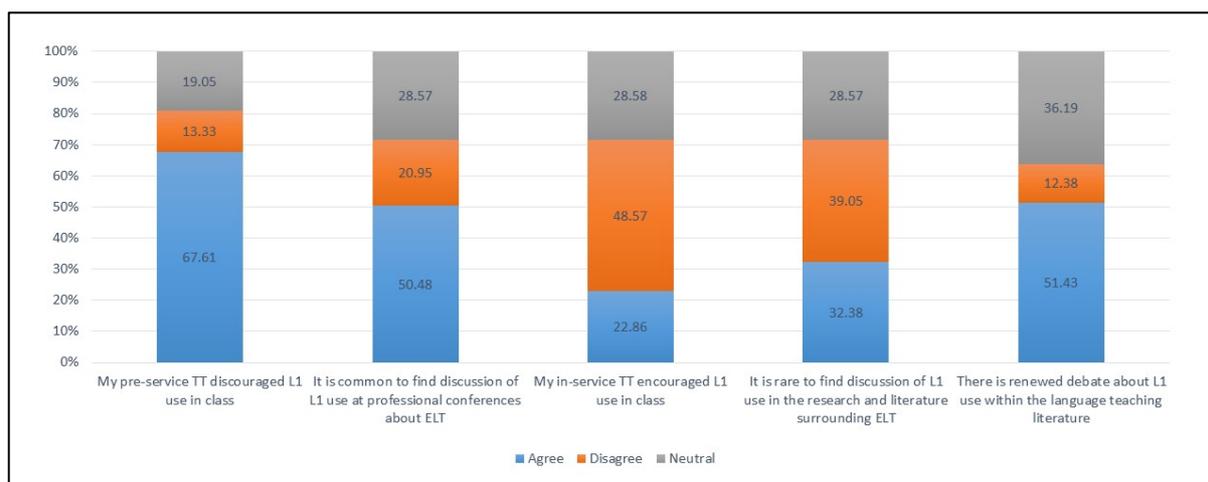


Figure 8: Teacher perceptions of ELT training in relation to L1 use

As shown in Figure 8, about 50% of participants disagree with the third item about L1 use being encouraged in their in-service (TT) teacher training; in fact, 67% agree that their pre-service teacher training discouraged L1 use. Around half of the teachers, however, are aware that there is current discussion about L1 use in ELT research and conferences.

Conclusion

From this study, it appears that, although generally discouraged in teacher training and numerous ELT methods, L1 is used by EFL teachers to some extent. This mirrors the findings of previous research in other contexts (Hall & Cook, 2013; McMillan & Rivers, 2011), which has found that English teachers do use L1 in the classroom to perform a number of functions. The reasons teachers gave for using L1 included explaining vocabulary and building a good relationship with students, showing their belief that, when used appropriately, L1 use can enhance L2 learning.

The views of the teachers given in this study clearly support the argument for the benefits of maximising the use of L2 and providing models of real language use of L2, while at the same time highlighting that L1 can be used effectively to perform certain functions when students share the same L1. These results appear to demonstrate that L1 might be incorporated into teaching practice when used effectively in the classroom to explain vocabulary and meaning, and to create a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, there appears to be a need to introduce a framework that clearly identifies both how and when to use L1. Such a framework could serve several pedagogical functions, make the use of L1 more useful and also free teachers from the sense of guilt by outlining where L1 can be used effectively.

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