

Arabic in ESL Classrooms: A Blessing in Disguise?!

Jana Muhieddine El Moabbi, Beirut Arab University, Lebanon

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Abstract

The dispute over whether to use or not to use learners' L1 inside the classroom has always been the topic of discussion for many people for various reasons. The debate has also involved ESL students. Some maintain that such use may lead to more dependence of an ESL on his Arabic language, which may delay the progress of mastering the target language. Whereas others believe that the use of Arabic inside the classroom may ease the process of learning the target language, as the students become better at dealing with instructions, develop more motivation to learn, participate in group work activities because learners share the same L1, Arabic, and are no longer embarrassed to get involved in classroom discussions. This article studies the case of university students who have Arabic as their native language, taking an intermediate university requirement course in English. These students shall answer a set of questions developed in the form of a questioner. The data will be analyzed and studied with respect to the scenario that each question constructs on the use of Arabic language inside the ESL classroom. The findings gathered from the quantitative analysis of the data collected, inspect why and when do students incline to use Arabic language in the ESL classroom, and provide instructors with insights on when to allow its use in class to promote learning. The study aims to draw ESL instructors' attention on how to make use of Arabic language for better ESL classroom management and thus better learning outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The use of one's native language in ESL classes has been debated for a long time. Some believe that the use of native language is not a problem, but are concerned about its appropriate use and when it is necessary to use. Others are against its use because of the risk of creating native language dependence, and thus preventing students from enhancing their learning skills. Many maintain that Arabic has no necessary role to play in EFL teaching and that too much Arabic use might deprive learners of valuable input in English. But there are other, also strong arguments for using students' native language in ESL classes, believing that native language is helpful in explaining a complex idea, helps students learn new vocabulary more effectively, prevent the waste of time in explanations and instructions, and keep students motivated in class. Furthermore, one cannot deny the fact that the idea of avoiding native language is too stressful for many students and it is the instructor's responsibility to create a comfortable class and help students feel confident and interact independently inside the classroom.

2. Literature Review

Language teachers have been debating whether or not to use the L1 in the L2 teaching. Some teachers have the opinion that L1 may be used under certain limitations (Cole, 1998) while others believe that L1 should be banned because it prevents students from acquiring the L2 (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Nazary (2008) stressed the role of the L1 in the L2 classroom in several methods, such as the Traditional methods (Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method (DM), and the Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Methods). Furthermore, Tillyer (2002, as cited in Stanley, 2002) described it as absurd to talk a language other than the target language for any reason.

The above-discussed opinions, which call for avoiding L1, rely on two main weak assumptions, as identified by Cook (2001). The first assumption is the similarity between L1 and L2 learning processes, and the second assumption is that learning L1 and L2 is a separate process.

However, the literature of teaching EFL reveals that there are teaching methods, which use L1 deliberately. For example, besides the Grammar-Translation Method mentioned previously, a relatively new teaching method that deliberately employs L1 has appeared and is known as the New Concurrent Method. This method requires teachers to balance the use of L1 and L2 (Faltis, 1990). Code switching, which facilitates language learning, should be systematic and purposeful. Four areas of code switching to L1 have been identified: introducing concepts, reviewing a previous lesson, capturing learners' attention and praising learners (Faltis, 19).

Elsa Auerbach (1993) conducted a detailed study on the notion of using English only in the English language classroom. She investigated the two different views of that topic: to either use it or avoid it. She tracked the 'English Only' movement through history and provided the justifications and reasoning behind that movement. She offered the following explanations for using L1 in the L2 classrooms:

- a. Using L1 reduces barriers to language learning and develops fellowship between teachers and students and between the students themselves.
- b. It is found that students who are allowed to use L1 had acquired L2 faster than students who used only L2 in their classrooms.
- c. Auerbach said that although there are two points of view to this topic, it is the teachers who ultimately decide whether they need to use the L1 or not. Every classroom is unique and for that reason, the teacher is the best judge to decide whether to use the L1 or to avoid it.

A study by Carolina Rodrigues and Gina Oxbrow (2008) considered the students' beliefs of whether the use of the L1 in English classrooms is a facilitator or a hindrance. The study found out that most of the students said that the use of L1 (Spanish in the study) in the English classroom actually helped them improve their L2. Most of the students agreed that they preferred if the teachers explained the grammar points in their L1 and not in the L2. However, it was not preferred for the teachers to give instructions and carry out activities in the L1. They also favored it when the teacher pointed out the similarities and differences between their native language and the L2 they are learning.

3. Rational and aim of the study

The debate of using L1 in L2 classrooms has grown in significance in light of recent research. However, in Lebanese universities, the issue has not received sufficient attention, and is rather avoided. Heidi Jones work in 2010 was the driving force for this research. Her work outlines the prevailing arguments in favor of, and against the use, of the L1 in L2 education. The paper concludes that many of the claims denying the value of the learners' L1 are not founded in empirical research therefore; the author determines that while L2-rich input is essential, the L1 can also serve as a valuable tool in L2 education.

This paper intends to explore the role of Arabic in ESL university courses in Lebanon. The aim was to investigate the opinions and attitudes of students towards using Arabic language in the ESL classroom, and thus better inform the debate.

The paper concludes that Arabic can serve as a valuable tool in L2 education. The findings might encourage L2 instructors to recognize that students may naturally resort to Arabic throughout the ESL learning process, and to keep an open mind to the possibility of occasionally employing Arabic as an educational tool.

4. Research Questions

- 4.1. Why and when do students incline to use Arabic language inside the ESL classroom?
- 4.2. When should instructors allow the use of Arabic language to promote English language learning in class?
- 4.3. When and how should Arabic language be used to provide better ESL classroom management?

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

The participants are 160 students of a General English course given as a university requirement at one of the universities in Lebanon. Since, this study is not investigating gender or age tendencies with respect to language acquisition, no attention was given to the count of males and females and their age.

5.2 Research Instrument and Data Collection

The method used for data collection was the questionnaire available in the appendix. The SPSS 20 software was used to provide a descriptive analysis of the closed questions it includes. The Cronbach alpha estimate measure of reliability was equal to 0.78. Since the study attempted to measure degrees of agreement, a Likert scale was used. Because the number of the participants was not big, the chi-square test was practical in identifying any existing relationships among the questionnaire variables (Salkind, 2008). It was a random sample, and gender was not one of the variables.

The questionnaire was given to ESL students sharing the same native language, Arabic. The aim of the methodology was to investigate the opinions and attitudes of students towards using Arabic language in the ESL classroom. The answers to the questions in the questioner were collected to set the data of the study.

6. Data Collection & Analysis

The section below sums the results obtained from the data analysis in the form of bar graphs. Important to mention that since the number of the participants was not big (160 students), the chi-square test was practical in identifying any existing relationships among the questionnaire variables (Salkind, 2008).

The quantitative analysis of the data collected on the use of Arabic language inside the ESL classroom with Arab students, revealed the student's positive attitudes towards using Arabic language in ESL classes. Below is a screen shot to the accurate numbers of the answers. The yellow cells to the right calculated the percentages of each of the answers given to the 18 questions.

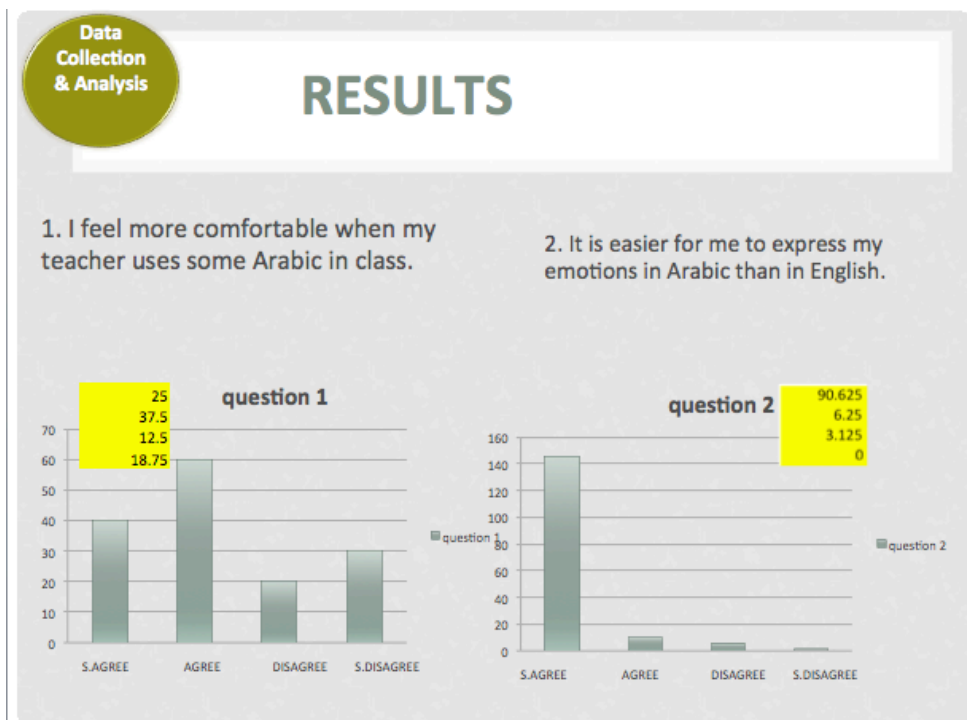
Question	s.agree	agree	disagree	s.disagree	Percentage
question 1	40	25	20	30	90.625
question 2	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 3	30	20	40	70	18.75
question 4	10	10	10	130	81.25
question 5	160	0	0	0	100
question 6	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 7	130	10	20	0	81.25
question 8	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 9	60	40	40	20	37.5
question 10	150	10	0	0	93.75
question 11	150	10	5	0	93.75
question 12	40	80	10	30	25
question 13	145	10	10	0	90.625
question 14	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 15	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 16	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 17	145	10	5	0	90.625
question 18	130	10	10	0	81.25

7. Findings

7.1. Why and when do students incline to use Arabic language inside the ESL classroom?

- Students tend to use Arabic language extensively rather than English while performing classroom tasks during group work tasks. L1 use is a normal psycholinguistic process that allows students to initiate verbal interaction with one another (Brooks & Donato, 1994) thus carrying out learning tasks through collaborative dialogue with peers.
- Learners resort to Arabic language when learning new words as it saves a lot of time.
- Arabic language saves a lot of time particularly when used to explain the meaning of difficult context and when organizing tasks.

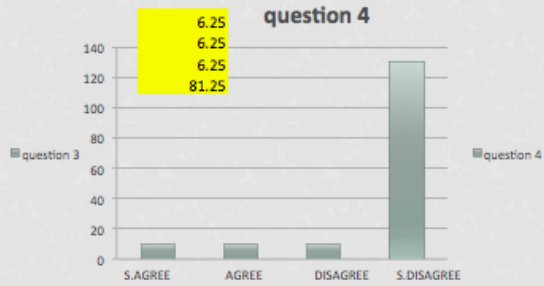
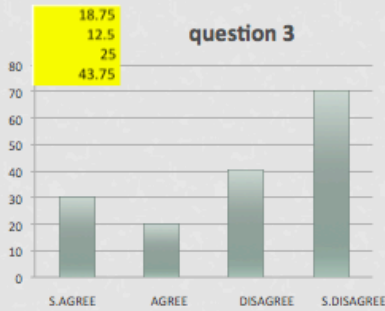
The slides below show the calculations of the data that led to these analyses in a graph form.



RESULTS

3. My ESL class should have an “English only policy”, that means no Arabic is allowed in class.

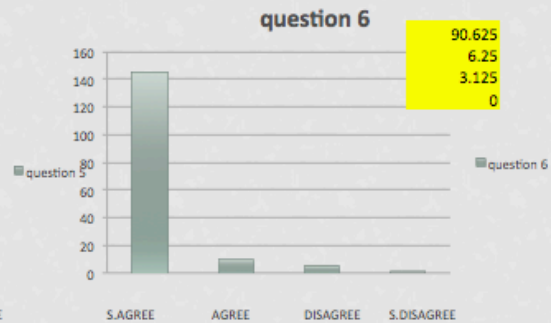
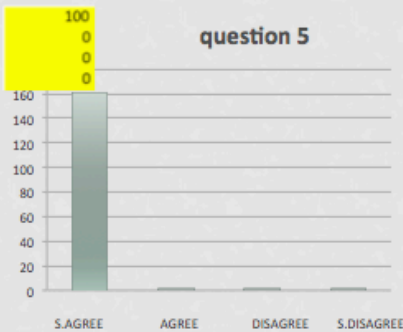
4. Using Arabic in ESL classes does prevent me from learning English.



RESULTS

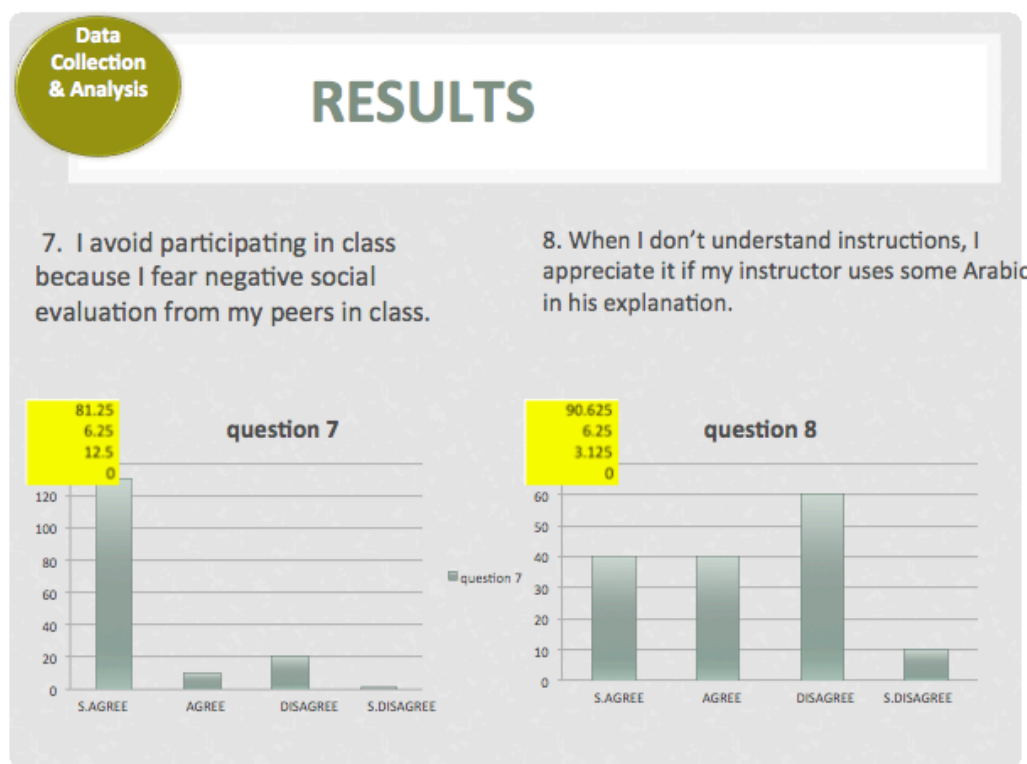
5. It is so less time consuming when new vocabularies are translated into Arabic.

6. I resort to Arabic language with my classmates during group work.



7.2. When should instructors allow the use of Arabic language to promote English language learning in class?

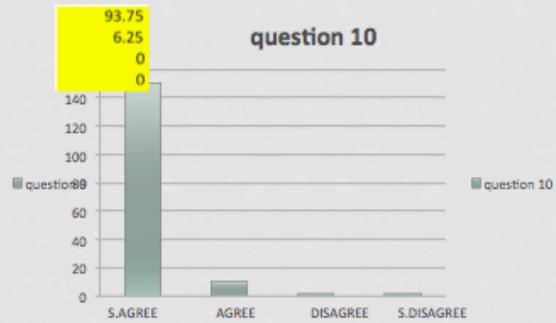
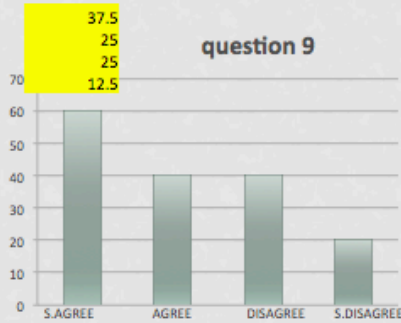
- Students do feel the need to express their ideas and thoughts in their own language. So, by being able to use both languages in their speech, they are more stirred to speak, and more likely to share their opinions and feelings. After all, one talks most when it comes to discussing either his feelings, or his opinions. This creates the perfect stimulus for moving students to practice the English language and participating in class.
 - The ability to use one's native language, Arabic in this situation, in his/ her discourse empower him or her with a sense of security and confidence in front of his classmates. This armor against the criticism of peers inside the class grants the student a sense of security and helps him or her feel less stressful thus promoting the learning experience.
 - During group work, as it opens space for wider interaction among team members, and thus better involvement in the tasks assigned.
 - Allow the use of Arabic when learning new contexts to avoid the misapprehension of the meaning of new word.
- The slides below show the calculations of the data that led to these analyses in a graph form.



RESULTS

9. I prefer being addressed in English language only when given feedback and clarifications about my mistakes.

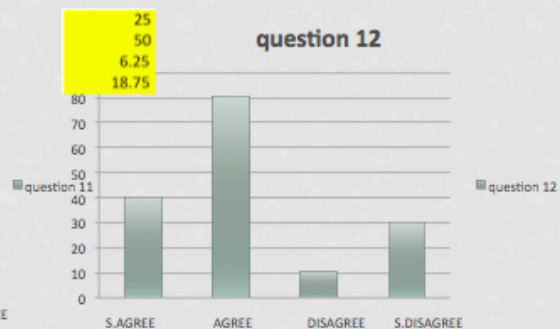
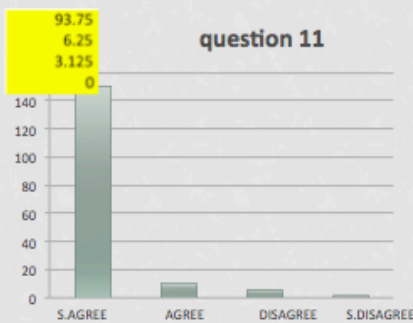
10. I become more motivated to speak in class if my instructor doesn't mind Arabic slips in my sentences.



RESULTS

11. I feel more comfortable practicing the language in the classroom if I can use Arabic fillers in my sentences without any feelings of guilt.

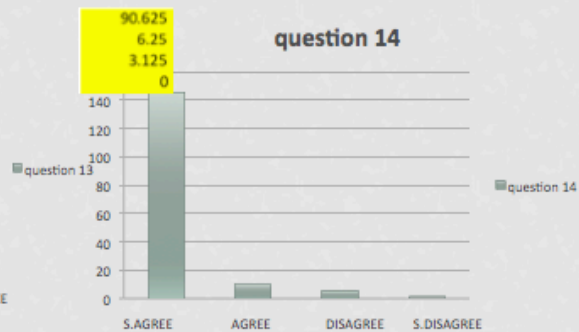
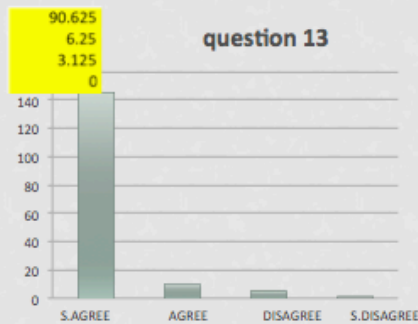
12. I become stressed during tests when test instructions are given in English only.



RESULTS

13. As my language acquisition progresses, I feel less and less dependent on Arabic translations.

14. Having to speak English only in class makes me feel nervous



7.3. When and how should Arabic language be used to provide better ESL classroom management?

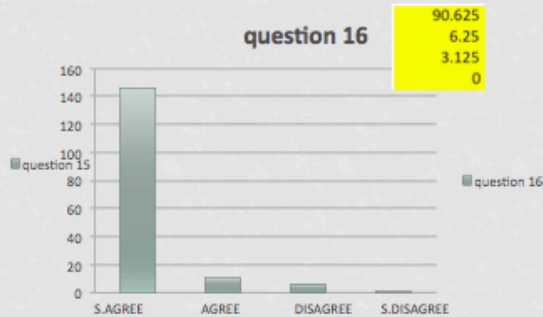
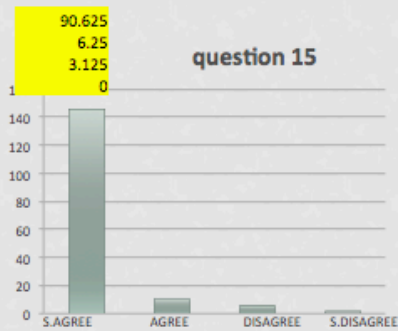
- The use of Arabic language by the ESL teacher does break the ice between her/ his students.
- Students feel the teacher to be more natural when she or he addresses them in Arabic during health fits, like coughing, hiccups or such, and thus establish a sincere connection with the instructor and start interacting and participating effectively in class.
- When the instructor addresses his or her students in Arabic language during disciplinary situations, the results showed that they are more embarrassed. This means that Arabic is more effective in such disciplinary situations than English. This will result in better classroom management and a better teaching environment.

The slides below show the calculations of the data that led to these analyses in a graph form.

RESULTS

15. When my instructor uses Arabic fillers in class, I feel he/she broke the ice.

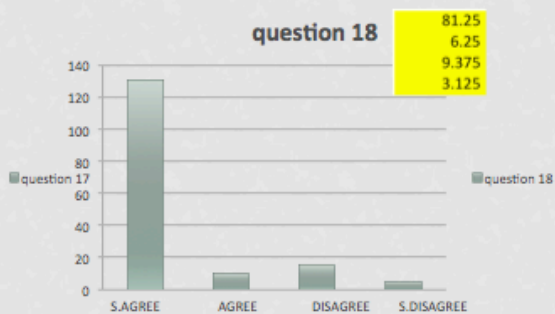
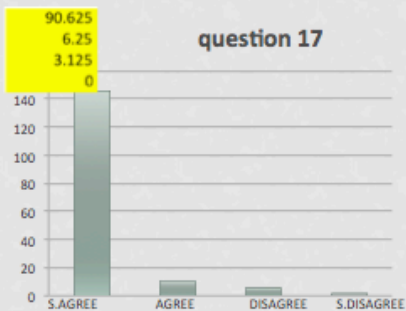
16. I believe the "friendlier" my relation is with my instructor, the more motivated I am in class.



RESULTS

17. If I suffer from a "coughing fit" in class and my teacher says "sa77a" instead of "bless you", I feel that my instructor's compassion is more natural and sincere.

18. I feel more embarrassed if my teacher reprimands me (with) saying "ekhras" instead of "shut up".



This is why, one cannot but conclude that Arabic should not be rejected during ESL classrooms, since it fulfills several functions and purposes for learners, and rather than creeping in as a guilt-making necessity, it can be deliberately used in the classroom in the previous scenarios.

8. Recommendations for further research

The results of the current research encourage taking steps into further research investigating the students' attitudes towards first language use in English classrooms with respect to different proficiency levels, language backgrounds, age and gender. Other type of investigation involving the teachers' experience in the field and their opinion would also be valuable. It would also be interesting to conduct research investigating the amount of first language use among students at different universities with a larger number of participants.

This study has helped highlight the reasons Arab learners use Arabic in the English classroom. Furthermore, it gave us insights on the way Arabic language can help ESL teachers manage their classes effectively. This research, in other words, helps pave the road for a long journey of investigation for Arabs learning English.

9. Conclusion

The use of Arabic language in ESL classes has been discussed for a long time. One of the problems that teachers sometimes face with students, who all share the same mother tongue, is that they use their native language rather than English in different situations in class. They do resort to their mother tongue when performing classroom tasks, group work activities, and when learning new vocabulary. This may be because they want to communicate something important, and so they use the language they best know. Students will almost certainly find speaking in Arabic language a lot easier than struggling with the English language.

This research verifies the practicality in allowing the use of Arabic in the ESL classroom as it helps in creating a better learning atmosphere in which students feel more at ease, break the ice, deal with the process of the language acquisition as something that comes naturally, without stress, embarrassment, or fear form any social criticism. One cannot deny that all these do hinder any learning process.

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- Contact email** : janaelmoabbi@gmail.com

Appendix
Questioner:

Dear Student,

The aim of this study is to investigate your attitudes and reasons towards using Arabic in English Language learning classes by both your teacher and you. I would be grateful if you answer the following questions, as your answers will help instructors and educators to understand your needs and overcome any difficulties you may have learning the English language.

Please circle ONE answer which best reflects your attitude to the given statement:

1. I feel more comfortable when my teacher uses some Arabic in class.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

7. I avoid participating in class because I fear negative social evaluation from my peers in class.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

15. When my instructor uses Arabic fillers in class, I feel he/she broke the ice.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

8. When I don't understand instructions, I appreciate it if my instructor uses some Arabic in his explanation.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

9. I prefer being addressed in English language only when given feedback and clarifications about my mistakes.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

17. If I suffer from a "coughing fit" in class and my teacher says "sa77a" instead of "bless you", I feel that my instructor's compassion is more natural and sincere.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

16. I believe the "friendlier" my relation is with my instructor, the more motivated I am in class.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

4. Using Arabic in ESL classes does prevent me from learning English.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

10. I become more motivated to speak in class if I my instructor doesn't mind Arabic slips in my sentences.

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

3. My ESL class should have an "English only policy", that means no Arabic is allowed in class.

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

11. I feel more comfortable practicing the language in the classroom if I can use Arabic fillers in my sentences without any feelings of guilt.

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

5. It is so less time consuming when new vocabularies are translated into Arabic.

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

13. As my language acquisition progresses, I feel less and less dependent on Arabic translations.

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

12. I become stressed during tests when test instructions are given in English only, and I don't understand what is required.

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse. Having to speak English only in class makes me feel nervous

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse

6. I resort to Arabic language with my classmates during group work.

- a. agree b. neutral d. disagree e. refuse