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**Volume 10, Number 4 (2024)****ISSN: 2395-0595****Exploring the Role of Native Language in English Language Instruction:  
A Literature Review on L1 Use in Libyan Secondary Education****Omkalthoum R. Mohamed Albakoush**[O.albakoush@zu.edu.ly](mailto:O.albakoush@zu.edu.ly)Zawia University, College of Education, Abi-Isa, English Department, Zawia, Libya

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**Abstract**

*This literature review explores the role of first language (L1) use in English language acquisition among secondary school students in Libya, examining how integrating L1 impacts communicative competence and classroom learning. While traditional monolingual principles advocate for minimizing L1 use to enhance immersion in the target language (L2), recent studies suggest that strategic incorporation of L1 can support comprehension, grammar acquisition, and classroom management, particularly in contexts where students and teachers share a native language. This review synthesizes findings from diverse sources, discussing the advantages and limitations of L1 use by both teachers and students. In Libyan secondary education, where resource limitations and large class sizes present additional challenges, L1 use often facilitates clarity and engagement in English language instruction. This study concludes by recommending a balanced approach that leverages L1 to reinforce English language skills without compromising immersion, thus aligning with 21st-century language teaching goals and the unique needs of Libyan students. Future research directions are suggested to better define the optimal degree and methods of L1 use in EFL classrooms within similar educational settings.*

**Keywords:** *First Language, Communicative Approach, English as a Foreign Language, Classroom Management, Language Acquisition.*

## **1. Introduction**

Teaching English as a foreign/second language is increasingly widespread nowadays around the world. Therefore, the number of people interested in learning English is increasing due to the need for English as an international language mainly due to information technology and the world becoming like a village. As there is rapid development in all fields of life due to the implementation of technology and sciences, language teaching and learning have benefited a lot from this progress. Thus, many countries adopt new methods, approaches, materials, and equipment with which to improve the learning/ teaching process. They intend to make it more productive. During the twentieth century, second language teaching excluded the use of L1 to improve the learning process. Furthermore, it has been argued for many years whether the avoidance or retention of L1 by either the teachers, students, or both, benefits the learning of a second language, which is English in my case.

Therefore, this paper aims to identify this principle in teaching second/foreign language classrooms. It also tries to shed more light on the advantages and disadvantages of L1 used by students and teachers about current conditions. This article will be divided into some sections. Firstly, the first section will introduce a brief background about the principle of 20th-century language teaching that avoids L1 use in L2 classes. Teaching English language as a second language in Libya will be taken in the second section. Then, I am going to review the conditions that seem helpful for teachers to use L1 in class and then analyze them in the third part. After that, I will examine the student's L1 use in this section. An evaluation of this principle regarding the 21st century will be taken in the next part. Finally, I am going to write a brief conclusion.

## **2. Background**

The emergence of the direct method in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was developed initially as a reaction to the grammar-translation method in an attempt to integrate more use of the second language to communicate (Larsen, 2000), in other words, avoiding the use of the students' native language or what Howatt (1984) refers to as the 'monolingual principle' in the second/foreign language teaching process. Despite the differences between most teaching methods used in the twentieth century, it could be said that nearly all of them similarly prevent the students' first language use in the classroom.

Apart from the grammar-translation method which dominated foreign/second language teaching for approximately all of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) classes were taught in the student's mother tongue, with little active use of the second language. Often the only drills were exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue, and vice versa as noted by Larsen-Freeman (2000). However, the appearance of the direct method of teaching over the twentieth century contributed to the idea that 'lessons be planned to be as monolingual as possible' (Butzkamm, 2003).

This has been debated for many years, since there is no justifiable study or evidence to exclude using L1 (first language) in learning languages classrooms, whereas, there are some reasons to be considered for excluding the use of L1 in the teaching process and it is often organised for two reasons which are that 'people learning foreign languages follow basically the same route as they acquire their mother tongue' as stated by Krashen (cited in Tang, 2002:37). In other words, L2 acquisition is similar to L1 acquisition, which is based, on the notion that children learn their first language as a result of constantly listening and speaking to people around them. Therefore, teachers 'must encourage direct and spontaneous use of the foreign language classroom.' (Franke cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:11) for best learning. In this case, L2 is best learned through massive amounts of exposure to the language with limited time spent using L1. This suggests that the student's first language should be excluded in second/foreign language classrooms. We must consider the nature of both language (first and second) acquisitions as being 'learning processes [that] take place in the same human mind' (Cook, 2001). Nevertheless, differences between both languages are noticeable which may affect the learning process. Accordingly, the first language acquisition and second-language acquisition should not be necessary in the same way. In this case, the exclusion of L1 use in classrooms 'must be for another reason' as Cook (2001: 154) said.

Furthermore, the second justification for avoiding using the first language in L2 classroom is that 'the two languages should be kept separate in [the students'] mind' (Cook, 2001:154). It is believed that both languages should be distinct and separate since each language seems to be rapidly developed without any contact with the other language. This provides the chance for students to think in the language they learn owing to frequently listening and speaking in that language (Dodson, 1967). This means that using the two languages in the classroom may lessen the students' ability to improve their second language learning. Therefore, L1 should not be used in second language classrooms in order to avoid this.

Cook (2001), however, argued that it could be considered the distinction between both languages in theory, where in terms of practice they are yet connected and cannot be separated. In addition, Spada (2007) believes that ‘the knowledge of two languages is interwoven in the mind’. In this case, there is no acceptable reason to avoid L1 use in L2 classes.

Regarding the above-mentioned reasons is indisputable justification to make classes monolingual only. Additionally, recent research has shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002). Therefore, the focus of this article will be firstly, on the advantages and disadvantages of teachers’ use of L1 in teaching their classes. The main role teachers play in the teaching process is merely that of being the source of the second spoken language in the classroom environment. Secondly, the student's L1 use rather than the target language which is being learned.

### **3. Teaching the English language as a second language in Libya**

Since Libya opened its doors to the world, the English language has become an essential language in the daily lives, careers, and job opportunities of Libyan students. The learners’ reason for studying English is mainly based on achieving a level of success to get better job opportunities in the future and to enrich their knowledge of the English language as it has become the best means of communication nowadays.

Libyan secondary school textbooks are now based on a communicative approach to teaching. The syllabus is specialized for each science, including life sciences, basic sciences, social sciences, and engineering. The materials of this level are comprised of a course book, a workbook, a teacher’s book, and a tape cassette. Every course book concentrates on four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and some linguistic issues (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar), and uses techniques based on the communicative approach. However, in addition, some aspects hinder teachers in teaching the English language; first, classroom facilities and the number of students. Teachers cannot run their classes well if there are no good facilities to teach, such as technology in the school especially in the language lab. The second one is that teachers cannot interact with each student if the number of students is too big in a limited time.

The third aspect which is from the students' level, is when there is a clash between the textbook aims and the students' level. Therefore, teachers find it difficult to match. As a result, teachers are still using the old methods to teach students the new textbook, even though it is based on being taught by the communicative approach which makes 'learners learn a language through using it to communicate' (Richards& Rodgers, 2001: 172).

Taking into account one of the big issues that English language teaching in Libya faces is the use of the Arabic language in English language classrooms. As an English language learner, I noticed that a significant number of secondary school teachers if not all use the Arabic language in English language classes rather than the English language. Even those who do not use the grammar-translation method which depends on student's L1, tend to use it in particular parts of their lessons where teachers and students share the same first language which is the Arabic language.

Concerning the role that teachers play in L2 learning, due to the lack of facilities that most Libyan schools suffer from, the teacher is the only spoken source of English in the classroom. As a consequence, it is important to recognize the situations where teachers use the Arabic language and why it is used in English language learning. As noted by Cook (2001) and Llurda (2005) the use of L1 by teachers is considered helpful for students in certain particular cases. These are outlined below.

### **3.1 Teachers' use of L1**

First, L1 is used as 'a conveyer of meaning' (Cook, 2001; Llurda, 2005). This is when teachers use Arabic as a useful way to explain the meaning of new words and sentences in English. This is to help conduct their lessons when it is difficult to convey the meaning in the English language only, particularly when teaching lower levels. Students cannot understand what the teacher is explaining if they do not know the meaning of most words in their lessons. The idea is that the first language plays a "supportive and facilitating role in the classroom" (Tang, 2002). When something in a lesson is not being understood, and is then clarified through the use of the Arabic language, that difficulty and pressure can be reduced or removed. On the other hand, the main argument of concern about including the Arabic language as a means of conveying the meaning of the English language is that L2 is best learned through enormous amounts of contact to the language with limited or no time spent using L1 (Tang, 2002).

Therefore, the more time students spend on using the English language (Spada, 2007; Llurda, 2005), the more successful the learning process will be. As the teacher in some countries the only spoken source of the target language, the learning of L2 should be through maximum exposure to that language to, (Chambers, 1992) and encourage learners using it to interact with each other and with the teacher as well. Although the key to teachers' use of the Arabic language in L2 classes is that it be used for clarification purposes only as shown above, this seems to limit students' opportunities for hearing as much of the English language as possible to acquire it rather than just learn it.

Furthermore, other reasons given by supporters of the Monolingual principle in explaining the meaning of L2 by using L1 is, that translating between L1 and L2 can be dangerous as it encourages the belief that there are 1 to 1 equivalents between the languages, which is not always the case. Additionally, Dodson (1967) shares a similar outlook which is that "words translated from one language to another do not possess equal meaning". They believe the two languages are distinct and separate because each language has its system and function. For example, the context that I am familiar with is the Arabic language, which is completely different from the English language (second language) in all aspects concerned with phonetics, phonology, structure, function, and meaning. Owing to this, there were several instances when teachers could not offer the meaning of English words in Arabic. If he/she did try the meaning that they provided did not always match the exact meaning of those words. Therefore, this appeared to increase the students' confusion rather than remove it. Teachers' use of English then in explaining the meaning seems to be safer than the Arabic use. This is to avoid the danger of confusing the students further.

Furthermore, for me, the biggest problem with English-only classes is that it does not take into consideration the fact that the majority of English teachers are not native speakers. Sometimes the teachers' own English is not very good, and they have difficulties in the English language themselves (Brown, 2001). Insisting on using the English language only, may severely hinder their communication ability and owing to this their teaching ability. In this case, the difficulties that teachers have in the English language often affect the students' performance. Students in turn seem to acquire the same problems that their teachers suffer from.

A further reasonable explanation made for teachers L1 use in English language classrooms, as Cook (2001:157) together with Llurda (2005) stated is using L1 as “a short cut in explaining tasks”. To be more precise, teachers use the Arabic language not only as an effective norm for explaining the meaning of words and sentences, but as a short cut for clarifying tasks to their students. Due to the important role that tasks play in the learning process, no matter which language is used. The important thing is to conduct the task as soon as teachers can (Cook, 2001). On one hand, the problem of the sole use of the English language in classes that many linguists argue is that “to soldier on in the target language can waste valuable time” (Chambers, 1992:66). That is to say, teachers’ use of the Arabic language in facilitating the learning of the English language can benefit the learning process by saving much time that English language use may waste to achieve the same result. On the other hand, many teachers themselves have concluded that as the classroom is often the students’ only exposure to the English language that exposure should be maximized (Llurda, 2005). As second/foreign language learning takes place in countries where another language is dominant, there is no need to speak this second/foreign language in everyday life. The teacher’s responsibility, in this case, is to provide as much exposure to that language as he can for his students.

The more acceptable reason for teachers’ use of the Arabic language in the English teaching process as stated by Cook (2001) as well as Llurda (2005) is “to explain grammar”. Many teachers found that grammar is very complex and is difficult to be carried out in the English language. The use of the Arabic language is considered a valuable technique to clarify grammar structures. Using the English language to explain grammatical issues does not make sense without providing students with several examples and tasks to practice, whereas, associating the example with word-to-word translation will certainly make more sense, as noted by Butzkamm (2003). In this case, there would be no need for an extra explanation in the English language to help learners to understand and thereby waste important time which could be useful for the teacher to move on to the next part. Moreover, Cook suggested other uses for the teachers’ use in L2 classrooms such as giving instructions, keeping discipline, giving feedback to students, checking comprehension, using bilingual dictionaries, classroom management, and many other uses that may genuinely emerge in classrooms.



However, one situation in which there is strong encouragement for L2 use only and no need for L1 is the multilingual classroom where students speak more than one first language. In this particular situation, L1 would seem to be ineffective in the classroom and it is possible to retain learning unless the teacher can speak all the particular L1s in the classroom (Cook, 2001).

### **3.2 Students L1 use**

According to Cook students are likely to use their first language with activities when doing pair and group work in particular, which teachers provide in the classroom. The use of L1 allows them to conduct their conversations without interrupting the trend of lessons, as proposed by Butzkamm (2003). By working in pairs and using the Arabic language they can have the possibility to continue an English language conversation. Nevertheless, about the non-use of the MT, Butzkamm (2003: 33) says that it, ‘seriously constrains what can be said and read.’ Hence, clarifying by using the Arabic language will avoid the feeling of annoyance that the non-use of it creates in students which consequently leads them to disconnect from personal interest topics (Butzkamm, 2003).

In addition, using L1 vocabulary allows learners to use the language that they may not yet possess in L2 to manage ideas and access higher levels of understanding. Avoiding this process may eventually create ‘the silence of non-participation’ (Chambers, 1993:67). Regarding students’ inquiries, it is believed that asking questions in the mother tongue is significant once it provides the chance to explore what they need. Not only this, but it eliminates the confusion that arises as a result of a lack of understanding. One other important reason for students to include their native language in L2 classes is the belief that first-language explanations can only lead them to have trust in the language that is being taught (Butzkamm, 2003). Only the Arabic language aids, therefore, can help students to trust English language phrases.

However, the argument that attempts to discredit enforcing the sole use of the TL is that it leads to the possibility of the alienation of students from the learning process. This exclusion seems to deny students cultural identity and tries to acculturate them rather than increase their intercultural communicative competence (Atkinson, 1993). In this case, thinking of ignoring their cultural identity will create an uncomfortable environment for student’s use of the English language and force them to separate themselves from the learning process.



While arguing for the option of using L1 in the classroom, most linguists are concerned at the same time about the overuse of it that can create laziness in students owing to over-dependence on their L1 and then failure to increase the opportunities of exposure to the second language (Atkinson, 1987). Although L1 use can help teachers create a rich atmosphere for students' better learning, the negative consequences of overusing it should also be considered.

#### **4. An evaluation with regard to the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

According to the above a total ban of L1 should not be considered as beneficial in twenty-first century teaching. The exclusion of L1 use in second language classes, however, is only based on the belief that exposure to the language leads to learning it. Whereas, the idea that avoiding the students' L1 in order to increase students' contact to the L2 only is not definitely sufficient. No evidence teaching straightforwardly in the TL leads to better learning of the TL (Pachler & Field, 2001, p85). Even though, 'you can banish the MT from the classroom, but you cannot banish it from the [students'] heads (Butzkamm, 2003: 31). Consequently, researchers and teachers should deal with this natural movement rather than work to oppose it.

Furthermore, the issue seems to be not the avoidance of L1 use in the classroom, but how much it should be used. Therefore, SLA research should pay considerable attention to the places where MT use is encouraged in L2 classrooms and how much this should be used.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article has argued one of the principles of twentieth-century language teaching which is that teachers and students should use the L2 rather than the L1 in the classroom. The use of the first language in the L2 classroom by both teachers and students can be beneficial in the language learning process and may even be necessary for increased understanding and acceptance of the new language by the language learners. This use of teacher L1 as a means for clarifying words meaning, explaining grammar, as a shortcut for clarifying tasks, keeping discipline and giving feedback, and other countless uses that may arise in the classroom. Moreover, students use their first language with activities that teachers mainly provide to help them conduct their lessons. Whereas, the mere argument supporting this avoidance of the first language in second language classrooms is the belief that L2 is best learned through direct contact with the language.

This cannot be considered the only strong reason to exclude L1 use in L2 classes. In my experience, L1 use seems to benefit the learning process once an appropriate balance is realized.

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