

Teaching and Learning English-as-a-Second / Foreign Language through Mother Tongue: A Field Study

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Abstract

The underlying study aims to investigate and analyze the actual reasons, attitudes, and purposes behind the use of the mother tongue (Arabic) in teaching English-as-a-second language to Arab students attending English courses as a university compulsory requirement for the study of English language and literature at Jordanian private and government-aided universities. To achieve this goal, the researcher analyzed data he collected from classroom observation at three different private universities. In addition, the writer analyzes results of responses to questionnaires distributed to 120 students and 12 teachers learning and teaching English at three universities – 40 students and 4 teachers from each university.

The results obtained show that almost all the respondents expressed the need for the use of Arabic in the English classroom because, according to them, it helps students understand the meaning of new or difficult words, explain complex syntactic rules, and save time. The study also shows that not allowing students to use their mother tongue will result in prohibiting them to have some opportunities to learn English better.

Keywords: classroom observation, grammar-translation method, direct method, audio-lingual approach

1. Introduction

The question whether teachers should use the mother tongue (the first language) of their students in a second language classroom is still unanswered and even controversial. For some researchers like Carless (2001) the use of the first language is common and a natural act in second/foreign language teaching, and it seems to make a positive contribution to the learning process. Similarly, Macaro (1997) sees the exclusion of the mother tongue impractical and deprives learners of an important tool for language learning. According to Nunan and Lamb (1996), foreign language teachers find the prohibition of the mother tongue in foreign language classes to be impossible. Lu (1985) reports that the use of the mother tongue is strongly recommended, because of the absence of opportunities for the actual use of the second/foreign language outside the classroom. Auerbach (1993, cited in Sharma, 2006:81) not only acknowledges the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom but also suggests its uses for classroom management, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions, explaining errors, and checking for comprehension. Brown (1980) and Ringworm (1987) have considered the positive and negative transfer of the mother tongue among the main principles of English-as-a-second language teaching and learning.

Opponents of the use of the mother tongue in a second language classroom have expressed the view that teachers should teach English through the medium of English. In their study conducted on Arab learners of English in Kuwait, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) came to the same conclusion that the first language should not be used in second/foreign language classrooms, since the aim of second language teaching is to approximate near-native competence. Similar to Macdonald (1993), Cook (2001) also believes that the use of the mother tongue not only undermines the learning process but also inevitably cuts down exposure to the foreign language.

Inspired by researchers like Kharma and Hajjaj (1989), Schweer (1991), and Sharma (2006), the author of this paper decided to carry out a similar study on Arab students attending English classes at Jordanian universities. The study aims to address these issues:

1) If Arabic is used in the English classroom, how frequently is it used? And for what reasons?

2) What are the attitudes of the students and teachers toward using Arabic in the English-as-a-second language classroom?

The writer has the same feeling Lu had (1985) in that the findings may be generalized to other situations than Arab ones.

2. Review of Related Literature

Approaches and methods used in teaching and learning foreign language differ from each other in the degree of the importance they give for the role of the mother tongue. This importance, according to Kelly (1969, cited in Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989), is related to the language skills and the set of techniques and procedures emphasized by each approach and method. For example, the Grammar-Translation Method and the Community Language Learning Approach place extensive emphasis on the mother tongue, since their aim is using the mother tongue for translation and explanation.

The use of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom is widespread and its exclusion, according to researchers like Rechards and Rodgers (1986) and Harbord (1992), can lead to the failure of getting the meaning across and to students' incomprehension. Eldridge's study (1996) in Turkish secondary schools and Schweer's study (1999) at Puerto Rican universities confirmed that the mother tongue serves a number of functions, such as giving the students an opportunity to understand the meaning of what the teacher has said, discussing the requirements of a task, and reducing students' anxiety. A similar study was conducted by Tang (2000) in a Chinese context, and in comparing her results to those of Schweer's, she states that "both studies indicate that the mother tongue was used by the majority of teachers investigated, and both students and teachers responded positively toward its use" (cited in Sharma, 2006:82).

Contrary to the above-reviewed researchers and studies that consider the use of the mother tongue as an integral aspect of teaching and learning a second language, the supporters of the Direct Method or the Natural Approach like Howatt (1984) and Krashen and Tarrell (1983) argued that a second language could be taught without the use of the students' mother tongue if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action, and classroom instruction was exclusively in the target language and "relating the words of the new language to their referents in the outside world" (Howatt, 1984:196, cited in Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989:224).

Both the Direct Method and the Natural Approach base second language learning on the same processes of the first language acquisition (see Krashen and Terrell, 1983:9). Then, the Direct Method and the Natural Approach exclude the mother tongue completely from the process of teaching and learning foreign languages in the classroom.

There are still methods and approaches which stand for the use of the mother tongue as well as for its exclusion from foreign language classroom. For example, the Audio-lingual Approach adopted almost total exclusion of the mother tongue in the early stages and accepted its use at a later stage (cf. Rivers, 1981). This means that the Audio-lingual Approach is based on linguistic competence.

Finally, it can be inferred that in the absence of precisely established teaching procedures, there is nothing, in principle, to prevent teachers and students from using their mother tongue as an aid whenever the need may arise.

3. Practical Procedures Used in the Study

The tools used in the study consisted of 120 students (60 male and 60 female) and 12 teachers, students' questionnaire, teachers' questionnaire, and observation of students and teachers in actual classroom situations. The students and teachers were selected from three different Jordanian private universities (one forty-student class and four teachers from each university).

4. Interpretation of the Results

4.1 Results of the Classroom Observation

The classroom observation aimed to find out the percentage of classroom time each of the three teachers spent using the students' mother tongue (Arabic), and on what occasion Arabic was used. The findings are described in the following table.

Table 1. Results of classroom observation (1% = half a minute of a 50-minute time classroom)

Occasion	Explaining new or difficult words	Explaining syntactic rules	Explaining difficult questions	Giving instructions	Total
Teacher					
Teacher 1	15 %	10 %	6 %	4 %	35 %
Teacher 2	17 %	12 %	7 %	6 %	41 %
Teacher 3	18 %	13 %	9 %	5 %	45 %

Table 1 shows the percentage of time spent by three teachers in a 50-minute time classroom using Arabic, and on what occasions Arabic was used by the teachers. As it is obvious from the table, the greatest percentage of time spent by all teachers using Arabic was used for explaining new or difficult words, followed by explaining syntactic rules, explaining difficult questions, and finally by giving instructions.

Teacher 1 used Arabic in his classroom 35 % (17.5 minutes) of the 50-minute time classroom with the largest percentage of time (15%) for explaining new or difficult words, but he used Arabic only 4% of the 50-minute time classroom for giving instructions.

Teacher 2 used Arabic 41% (20.5 minutes) of the 50-minute time classroom. The largest percentage of time (17%) he used Arabic was for explaining new or difficult words, followed by 12% for explaining syntactic rules, 7 % for difficult questions, and only 6 % for giving instructions.

Teacher 3 had the largest percentage of time (18%) for explaining new or difficult words, followed by 13% for explaining syntactic rules, 9% for explaining difficult questions, and 5% for giving instructions.

4.2 Results of Questionnaires

1) Results of the students' questionnaire: a questionnaire was distributed to 120 students. The findings are provided in the following table.

Table 2. Results of students' questionnaire

1. Do you use Arabic in the classroom?	
a. Yes: 75%	b. No: 25%
2. When do you think that the use of Arabic in the English class is necessary?	
a. For explaining new or difficult words:	70%
b. For explaining syntactic rules:	68%
c. For conducting part of discussions:	20%
d. For explaining difficult questions:	60%
3. Why do you think that the use of Arabic is necessary?	
a. it helps me understand new or difficult words better:	72%
b. it helps me understand syntactic rules better:	65%
c. it makes me feel less lost:	20%
d. it facilitates learning:	12%
4. What percentage of time you think Arabic should be used?	
<u>Time</u>	<u>response</u>
a. 5%	5%
b. 10%	15%
c. 15%	30%
d. 20%	35%

Table 2 shows that the majority of the students (75%) realized that Arabic should be used in the English

classroom. Many students (70%) replied that Arabic should be used to explain new or difficult words, followed by 68% of the students who think Arabic should be used to explain syntactic rules, 60% who think that Arabic is necessary in the English classroom to explain difficult questions, and finally 20% of the respondents said Arabic is needed for conducting part of discussions in the classroom

In explaining why students think that the use of Arabic is necessary in the classroom, the majority (72%) think it helps them understand new or difficult words better, followed by 65% who think that the mother tongue helps understand syntactic rules better, 20% think it makes them feel less lost, and 12% of the students think that Arabic facilitates learning English in the classroom.

When students asked what percentage of time they think Arabic should be used, 35% of them replied that 20% of the 50-minute time class should be used, followed by 30% who think that 15% of the time should be allowed for the use of Arabic, 15% think that 10% of the time should be used, and finally 5% for the use of 5% of the time classroom.

The results of table no. 2 show that the majority of the students do not support more than 20% of a 50-minute time classroom for the use of Arabic.

2) Results of the teachers' questionnaire; a questionnaire was addressed to 12 teachers. It focused on issues, such as:

- a. whether teachers use their students' mother tongue,
- b. the purposes of the use of the first language they think to be necessary, and
- c. Why teachers think that the use of the mother tongue is necessary.

The findings are provided in the following table:

Table 3. Results of teacher's questionnaire

1.	Do you use Arabic in the English classroom?	
	a. Yes : 70%	b. No : 30%
2.	For what purposes do you think that Arabic is necessary in an English classroom?	
	a. for explaining new or difficult words	: 80%
	b. for explaining syntactic rules	: 60%
	c. for explaining difficult questions	: 35%
	d. for conducting part of discussions	: 15%
	e. for giving instructions	: 10%
3.	Why do you think that the use of Arabic is necessary?	
	a. it helps understanding greatly	: 50%
	b. it is more effective	: 38%
	c. it is less time consuming	: 20%
	d. it facilitates teaching and learning	: 10%

Table 3 reveals that the vast majority of the teachers (70%) realized that Arabic should be used in the English classroom. When teachers asked for what purposes the use of Arabic is necessary, a great number of them (80%) realized that the use of Arabic is necessary for explaining new or difficult words, followed by 60% of the teachers who think that the mother tongue should be used to explain syntactic rules, 35% think that the first language should be used to explain difficult questions, 15% of the teacher think Arabic should be used to enable students to conduct part of discussions, and finally 10% who think that the first language should be used to give instructions .

In explaining why teachers think that the use of Arabic is necessary in the English classroom, half of them (50%) replied that Arabic helps students understand their classes greatly, followed by 38% think that it is more effective, 20% who realized that it is time consuming, and finally 10% think it facilitates teaching and learning.

The results of both questionnaires show that the use of Arabic in an English classroom is justified. It is mainly useful to explain the meaning of new or difficult words, to explain syntactic rules, and to explain difficult

questions. The results are in agreement with the results of the classroom observation. Students prefer to use Arabic because it aids them understand their teachers and because it helps them feel less lost in the English classroom.

5. Discussing the Findings

The present study obtained similar findings to Tang's study on Chinese students learning English and to Kharmah's and Hajjaj's study on Arab students learning English in schools in Kuwait. All these studies show that both teachers and students responded very positively toward the use of the mother tongue in an English class. The writer summarizes the most important findings of his study in the following points:

1) More than two thirds of the students (75%) and of the teachers (70%) actually use the first language in the English classroom. This is also confirmed by all the classes observed (see table no.1).

2) The majority of the teachers and students questioned use the mother tongue for explaining new or difficult words, in addition to explaining syntactic rules, difficult questions, conducting part of discussions, and a small number of them say they use Arabic for giving instructions (see tables no.2 and 3).

It seems that both teachers and students use Arabic in a fairly systematic way. That is to say, whenever they feel a specific need for it.

3) The majority of teachers and students do not believe that the mother tongue facilitates teaching and learning a second language. Only 10% of the teachers and 12% of the students believe that the first language facilitates teaching and learning a second language. All teachers observed think that the facilitation process of teaching and learning rests with explaining difficult words and complex syntactic rules.

Teachers and students say that the first language hinders fluency, destroys motivation, and distracts students from learning English properly. These worries become legitimate only if and when teachers and students overuse the mother tongue in a second language classroom.

6. Conclusion

The present study shows that the use of the mother tongue in foreign language classrooms can help in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, teachers and students do not use their mother tongue randomly. Rather, it seems to be used systematically and purposefully. This is supported by the writer's findings. For example, the use of the mother tongue is shown clearly in explaining difficult words and complex syntactic rules. The study also shows that teachers are concerned about the influence of the mother tongue on the process of second language teaching and learning. The overuse of the mother tongue makes students unable to communicate in the second language they are learning, and it distracts and demotivates them of using the second language. Therefore, the use of the mother tongue should be less encouraged in a second language classroom. But total prohibition of the mother tongue will certainly deprive student of certain opportunities to learn more and better. The teacher should know when to use and when not to use the first language.

The findings of this study point to the need for controlling the use of the mother tongue in the second language classroom. And finally, the writer hopes that this study will open wider doors to explore new ways about the use of the first language in the second language classroom.

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