The Use of First Language in Arabic Language Classroom: A Teaching Buttress or a Learning Obstacle?

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Abstract

The issues of the use of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classroom have been debated among researchers for many years. In other words, there have been various shifts to and from the utilization of L1 in Arabic classrooms over the last decades. Some of the publications reflected views by proponents of the practices, while others contained opinions by its opponents. The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyse these issues more thoroughly. To address these issues more comprehensively, the nature of the Arabic education in the institution is discussed. Code-switching theory is used as the theoretical background. The analysis of the issues focuses on the reasons behind teachers using L1 in the Arabic classrooms and examines what are the teaching skills in L1 that teachers prefer to apply in their classrooms.

Keywords: First language, target language, Arabic classroom, Code-switching

Introduction

The issues on whether to use or not to use students' first language (L1) in second language (L2) classroom have increasingly generated debates among researchers and language teachers for many years. Some teachers feel that L1 can be used in certain circumstances.

For instance, it can be used to increase students' comprehension and learning of the L2(Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002), present new vocabularies, explain difficult grammar and give instructions as well as give suggestions(Mirza, Mahmus,and Jabbar, 2012).

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According to Cole (1998), L1 is the most useful for novices since students at this level have little or no knowledge about L2. It can also be used to introduce the major differences between L1 and L2, to save a lot of guessing, to motivate students and to reduce their anxiety. On the other hand, Mahadeo (2006) asserts that the use of L1 is a barrier of learning L2 and it may also prevents the student from acquiring the valuable input in the L2(Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Although there are a number of studies which have discussed the use of L1 in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, but only few studies have explored the issues from the perspective of the Arabic language as a foreign language classroom. Hassan Basri (2005)found that many teachers still do not use Arabic language thoroughly in their teaching. Teachers do not emphasize on the listening and speaking skills and they assume that those skills are not important.

Thus, in this paper, these issues are examined and analysedin a detailed manner. We will focus our discussion in the context of learning Arabic at the Islamic Studies foundation, University of Malayaat Nilam Puri. We chose this academy because the Arabic language and Islamic studies subjects are taught in Arabic language and students who are studying in this academy came from various backgrounds. They have also sat for their Arabic languagesubject at the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia(SPM) level. Therefore, it is crucial to know how students from various backgrounds and environment study Arabic language. What are the reasons behind teachers using Malay language in the Arabic classrooms? How many hours are devoted to the teaching of Arabic language and which partshould be spent on teaching grammar? Is the use of Malay language in Arabic classrooms can be considered as a teaching support? Does the use of Malay language affect students' learning process negatively or perhaps positively? In order to address this issue more thoroughly, the nature of Arabic education in the institution is examined.

Code-Switching Theory

Code-switching is a feature of bilingual speech occasioned by language contact.Woodall (2002, p.8)defines language-switching as "any non-instructed use of the firstlanguage writing during the second language writing process."

On the other hand, Qi (1998, p.414)stateslanguage-switching as "a cognitive phenomenon" in which L1 students switch from L2to L1 "as the language of thinking in the cognitive process" while engaged in L2 learning.

Several studies have examinedL2 learners' language switching. For example, Beare and Bourdages (2007),Murphy and Roca de Larios (2010),Qi (1998), Woodall (2002) confirmed the L1 use during L2learningand also discussed the differences in the purposes and frequencies of using L1. Moreover,amongst the studies, it was confirmed that L2 learners retrieve their L1 to meet the learningdemands. The task difficulty was among the reasons behind the L2 learner's tendency toretrieve their L1 while they arelearning L2.

The code switching termhasbroadly discussed and used in linguistics and a variety of related fields. Studies of language acquisition, second language acquisition, and language learning use the code switching term to describe either bilingual speakers' or language learners' cognitive linguistic abilities, or to describe classroom or learner practices involving the use of more than one language. Moving between two languages is common among adults' bilinguals; although its nature varies with situation and languages, where and how it occurs is not random but is rule-governed. Early views of code switching were negative. Learners of second language were said to fall back on their first language when they lacked a word in their second language. Instead, recent study shows that code switching can do much more than merely filling lexical gaps. It can serve many purposes, drawing on sophisticated knowledge of languages and their usage. However, speed of processing is also affected by code switching: recent research shows that switching between words in two languages slows processing compared with the presentations of words in each language separately(Conboy, 2010) .

L2 learners switch from L2 to L1 for different purposes. They can be categorized as for generating ideas, goal-settings, structuring, self-instruction, text-organization, text-evaluation, metalinguistic purposes and meta comments. There were variations in the duration and frequency of language-switching between studies as well as the participants in studies. The inconsistency of the specific level of proficiency in which L2 learners tend to frequently resort to their L1 to overcome their task difficulties was found through these results. Qi (1998) revealed that high-level proficient students switched to face their high knowledge demands.

Similarly, Wang (2003)revealed that students with higher proficiency level switched to their L1 more frequently than students with lower proficiency level.

On the contrary, Woodall (2002) found that intermediate students used their L1 more than advanced students. Also, Beare and Bourdages (2007)confirmed that high proficient learners do not switch frequently to their L1. One possible explanation for this inconsistency in the results is that the participants were fromdifferent background; therefore, the differences in the first languages would provide different results. Also, not all the studies had participants with different level of proficiency, eliminating the chances for better contrasting results.

The Use of L1 in Major L2 Methodologies

Language teachers have been debating whether or not to use the L1 in the L2 teaching. Some teachersopine that L1 may be used under certain limitations and appropriate(Cole, 1998)while others feel that L1 should not be allowed at all because it prevents students to learn L2(Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Nazary (2008)asserts that in the field of L2, there are several common classifications of methods which deal with the role of L1 in the L2 classroom: Traditional methods or Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method (DM), Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Methods (CM).

The GTM is usually conducted in the students' L1 to help them understand their L1 better through translation and analysis of the L2 grammar(Hadley, 2001). Grammar rules are learned deductively; students learn grammar rules by rote, and then practice the rules by doing grammar drills and translating sentences to and from the targeted language. There is little use of L2 and the instruction is given in the students' L1(Celce-Murcia, 1991). More attention is paid to the form of the sentences being translated than to their content. There are two main goals of grammar-translation classes. One is to develop students' reading ability to a level where they can read literature in the targeted language(Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The other is to develop students' general mental discipline. According to Hamdallah (1999), this method depends heavily on translating to the students' L1.

The DM of teaching is not limited to but often used in teaching L2. This method refrains from using the learners' L1 and uses only the L2. The aim of this method is to emphasize language use by providing a direct contact with the L2 in meaningful situations.

It represents critical reaction to the teaching methods of the ancient Grammar Translation Method which produced knowledge about language rather than knowledge of the language. The general goal of the direct method is to provide learners with a practically useful knowledge of the language. They should learn to speak and understand the targeted language in everyday situations.

The audio-lingual method is a style of teaching used in teaching foreign languages. It was developed in an attempt to address some of the perceived weaknesses of the direct method. It is based on behaviourist theory, which professes that certain traits of living things, and in this case, humans could be trained through a system of reinforcement—correct use of a trait would receive positive feedback while incorrect use of that trait would receive negative feedback. This approach to language learning is almost similar to the direct method. Like the direct method, the audio-lingual method advises students to be taught a language directly, without using the students' native language to explain new words or grammar in the target language. However, unlike the direct method, the audio-lingual method does not focus on teaching vocabulary. Rather, it is common forteachersto drill students in teaching grammar.

The communicative method is an approach to the teaching of foreign languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. According toHamdallah (1999) and Hadley (2001), the communicative approach is one of the most popular language teaching approach today. This approach has raised the ban on using L1 in the L2 learning, however limited L1 use is allowed in the L2 classroom (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Hamdallah, 1999; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The use of L2 in the foreign language classroom needs to be maximized in order to develop their language skills. According to Medgyes (1999), the use of mother tongue in classrooms has been one of the greatest dilemmas in the foreign language class for nearly a century. Although learners should be exposed to the second language as much as possible, but Nation(2001)argued that the L1 plays an essential role in communicating meaning in L2 teaching.

Reasons for using L1 in the L2 classroom

The bilingual approach has been accepted by researchers who believe that specific use of L1 is a helpful technique in the L2 classroom.

Thus, many researchers have figured ways out to use L1 into the L2 teaching efficiently. For instance, Tang (2002) often use L1 for low and medium proficiency level students in English classes to give instructions, explain meanings of words, explain complex ideas and explain complex grammar points. Students may understand better when the explanations of the subject matters are given in their own language. Alshammari (2011)and Machaal (2012)argued that the use of L1 can save teachers' time of explaining, increasestudents' understanding and make the learning process becomes more effective. The use of L1 with novices has verified to be a very useful and valuable device in enhancing students' understanding. Another significant reason for teachers' use of the L1 in the L2 classroom is to build natural relationship between teachers and their students. There is no obstacle between teachers and their students(Turgut and İrgin, 2009). The communication between teachers and students becomes easier(Nation, 2003). Accordingly, students feel free to ask their teachers for any difficulties they encounter.

The proponents of the code-switching theory argued that when teachers use code-switching to put their message across, their behaviour is similar to naturally occurring code-switching activities that take place in various real-life situations (Macaro, 2009). This optimal use of L1 was defined as one "where code-switching in broadly communicative classrooms can enhance second language acquisition and/or proficiency better than second language exclusivity" (Macaro, 2009, p.38). A number of scholars who seemed to share this view areAtkinson(1987), Auerbach (1993) and Cook (2001). Furthermore, the usefulness of L1 as a cognitive and mediating learning tool has been significant for a quite some time (Macaro, 2009).

Harbord (1992) concluded that there are three reasons for using L1 in the classrooms. They are facilitating communication, facilitating teacher-student relationships, and facilitating the learning of L2. Cook (2001) elaborated further by stating teachers should use L1 to convey meaning and organize classrooms. Students can use L1 for scaffolding (i.e building up the basics, from which further learning can be processed) and for cooperative learning with fellow classmates. Perhaps the biggest reason for using L1 in the classroom though, is that it can save a lot of time and confusion(Harbord, 1992).

Teachers' Attitudes towards the use of L1 in the L2 Classroom

There have been a number of researches on the use of L1 in L2 classes. Harbord (1992) for example, indicates that many second language teachers have attempted to create English-only classrooms but unfortunately, it leads to students misunderstanding. Therefore, hedraws the conclusionto use translation method to make student understand better. This view is in line with Cameron (2001) and McCann (2005) who proposed that translation can be used positively in explaining the structures of language and giving feedback.Turnbull (2001)stressed that teachers may use L1 in appropriate ways to help students understand unfamiliar words.

Al-Nofaie (2010)carried out a study to examine the attitudes of three teachers and 30 students in Saudi school towards the use ofL1 in English classes. The results showed that the participants' use of L1 seems to be systematic. Teachers preferred using L1 with novices and low achieving students to assist them in order to comprehend new language, and for specific reasons. For instance, L1 was used to explain grammatical terms, introduce new vocabulary and give exam instructions. A study conducted by Alshammari (2011) investigated the opinions of teachers and students about the use of mother tongue in foreign language classroom. The findings revealed that the proper use of L1 in L2 classrooms seems not to affect students' exposure to the L2. It may be necessary in order to increase students' comprehension.

These views were supported by Machaal (2012) and Salah and Farrah (2012). Machaal (2012)verified the attitudes and beliefs of the students, foreign language teachers and policy makers towards the use of the L1 in foreign language classrooms. The findings showed that most participants agreed and supported the use of L1 in L2 classroom. They accepted that L1 should be used whenever is necessary and it could be useful in explaining vocabularies and facilitating comprehension.In addition, the study also aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions toward using mother tongue in the targeted language classroom. The study found that L1 should be occasionally used to simplify the teaching and learning processes.

Arguments against Using L1

Some researchers argue that using L1 in the L2 classroom might affect students' learning process negatively since it reduces the learners' exposure to the L2 and reduces their opportunities for using the targeted language(Deller and Rinvolucri, 2002; Polio and Duff, 1994). According to Krashen and Terrell(1983), L1 should not be used in the L2 classrooms to enhance students' exposure to the L2, since students acquire the L2 through the same way they acquire their L1.

Another argument is the interference from the mother tongue. Interference can lead to difficulty in the L2 learning and to avoid that, L1 should be separated in L2 learning(Cook, 2001; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). According to Harbord (1992), learnersmay assume that word by word translation is a meaningful techniques if teachers overuse L1 in their teaching, therefore they will work towards transferring meaning in L2 learning.Phillipson (1992)asserted that the more L2 is taught the better the results will be. In line with his study, Auerbach (1993) indicated that students will learn more quickly if they are exposed more to L2; as they hear and use L2, they will internalize it and begin to think in L2. Similarly, Polio and Duff (1994, p. 322)insiststhat using L1 "prevent students from receiving input they might be exposed to in social situations outside the classroom".

Arabic Language in the Islamic Studies Foundation, University of Malaya

The Islamic Studies foundation, University of Malaya at Nilam Puri is a feeder for Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. The total credit requirements to complete the foundation programme in Islamic Studies are 52 credit hours (CHs) with one year duration of study (two regular semesters and one special semester). From the total of 52 credit hours, 30 of them are allocated to learn Arabic language subjects. Arabic language subjects in this academy are divided into a few categories (Akademi Pengajian Islam Universiti Malaya Nilam Puri, 2013): speaking skills, reading skills, writing skills, syntax and morphology (grammar). There are 12 credit hours which are allocated for Arabic grammar, six credit hours for writing skill, and 8 credit hours for reading and speaking skill. The simple grammar is embedded in teaching the three skills but a thorough teaching of Arabic grammar is taught separately.

Table 1: Arabic Language Subjects in Adacemy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya Nilam Puri

Course Name	Credit Hours
Syntax (Beginner)	2
Syntax (Intermediate)	2
Syntax (Advanced)	2
Morphology (Beginner)	2
Morphology (Intermediate)	2
Morphology (Advanced)	2
Writing Skill (Beginner)	2
Writing Skill (Intermediate)	2
Writing Skill (Advanced)	2
Reading Skill (Beginner)	2
Reading Skill (Advanced)	2
Speaking Skill (Beginner)	2
Speaking Skill (Advanced)	2

Students who are studying in this academy come from three different types of schools: religious secondary school, national religious secondary school, and national secondary school. Students from religious secondary school are very familiar with Arabic language because all Islamic studies and Arabic books are written in Arabic language. However, students from national religious secondary school and national secondary school are less familiar with Arabic language compared to students from national religious secondary school because they only know Arabic language from Arabic language subject.

Teaching Arabic Syntax and Morphology

Arabic syntax and morphology or grammar lessons are chosen and assigned priority on the basis of the needs of learners because all grammar should be taught in meaningful contexts, not in isolation. Teachers may use Malay language in judicious way to teach Arabic grammar because it will help students' comprehension. The goal of grammar instruction is not only to enable students to carry out their communication purposes, but what is more to facilitate understanding, make meaning and improve writing skills.

Teachers usually use Malay languageto explain difficult words for students with lower proficiency, so that they do not fail to keep pace with their peers. Student may also facedifficulties in understanding linguistics terms in Arabic language. Another reason for the use of Malay language in Arabic classrooms is the students' level. The novices especially students who are coming from national secondary schools need more explanation in Malay languagebecause they have not made good progress in Arabic yet. Al-Nofaie (2010) argues that the use of L1 for teaching grammar is the most common uses amongst the teachers. Dickson (1996) and Franklin (1990) claim that the use of L1 with the beginners or lower level students was an important factor in enhancing teachers' use of L1. However, teachers should bear in mind that over using the L1 may discourage students in learning L2.

Teaching Speaking Skill

Speaking skill needs interaction among students and teachers. In classrooms, teachers must encourage students to speak – to practice their ability to talk in ways that express their meanings. The goal of teaching speaking skill is to be able tocommunicate efficiently. In teaching speaking skill, the use of L1 is not allowedat all because it will inhibit the students that being exposed to Arabic to learn more and better. This supports the belief that using L1 might be harmful for the students' learning process since it reduces their opportunities for using the targeted language (Deller and Rinvolucri, 2002; Polio and Duff, 1994; Turnbull, 2001). Teachers must build an Arabic environment and try to create meaningful learning environment to attract students to speak in Arabic language. They must try as much as possible to avoid Malay languageduring the learning process either for greeting, giving class instruction andcontrasting L1 and L2.Students should also not to be permitted to ask questions in Malay language. The reason for avoiding Malay language in the classrooms is to provide students with sufficient opportunities to practice Arabic language. It is true that students need to practice Arabic language as much as possible, especially in the context of Malaysia, where Arabic language is rarely spoken outside the classrooms. The conversation of Arabic language between students and teachers consequently may enhance and improve student language.

Teaching Reading Skill

Traditionally, the purpose of learning to read in a language is to have access to the literatures that are written in that language.

In language instruction, reading materials have traditionally been chosen from literary texts that represent "higher" forms of culture.This approach assumes that students learn to read a language by studying its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, not by actually reading it. In this approach, lower level learners read only sentences and paragraphs generated by textbook writers and instructors. The reading of authentic materials is limited to the works of great authors and reserved for upper level students who have developed the language skill.

The communicative approach to language teaching has given instructors a different understanding of the role of reading in the language classrooms and the types of texts that can be used in instruction. When the goal of instruction is to achieve communicative competence, everyday materials such as train schedules, newspaper articles, and travel and tourism websites become appropriate classroom materials, because reading them is one of the waysof how the communicative competence is developed. The purpose(s) for reading and the type of text determine the specific knowledge, skills, and strategies that readers need to apply to achieve comprehension. Reading comprehension is thus much more than decoding. A reading is comprehended when the reader knows which skills and strategies are appropriate for the type of text, and understands how to apply them to accomplish the reading purposes.

Instruction in reading and reading practice thus has become essential parts of language teaching in every level. In reading instructions, teachers are suggested to avoid using students' first language in explaining the meaning. They may use pictures, body language, drawing or synonym words to elucidate the meanings. However, in a few cases,they are allowed to use L1 to clarify the meaning of abstract words and to translate new words which could be a clear and quick strategy especially for lower level students when they are not able to understand the input and clueless of what is going on in their classrooms.

Teaching Writing Skill

Writing in a second language (L2) is a challenging and complex process. While the first language (L1) writing process includes producing content, drafting ideas, revising writing, choosing appropriate vocabulary, and editing text, writing in an L2 involves all of these elements jumbled with second language processing issues.

In the case of lower L2 proficiency writers, these L2 issues can overwhelm the writing process, even to the point of a complete breakdown of the process(Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

Although many L2 writers use their L1 in certainway while writing in the L2, the amount of L1 used during L2 writing is not the same for all L2 writers. In general, proficient L2 learners do not depend heavily on the L1 to drive the writing process because they have a sufficient level of L2 automaticity and knowledge to think and plan in the L2(Jones and Tetroe, 1987). However, lower L2 proficiency writers rely more heavily on their L1 during the writing process in order to sustain the process and prevent a complete breakdown in language(Uzawa and Cumming, 1989).

Several studies have looked at the effect of composing in the L1 and then translating into the L2 (Cohen and Brooks-Carson, 2001). These studies have found that the lower L2 proficiency writers benefited from composing in the L1 and then translating into the L2, a result that highlights the importance of using L1 composing strategies for lower L2 proficiency writers.Jones and Tetroe (1987)did a study on the effect of L1 use during L2 writing. They found that the lower L2 proficiency writers who did not use their L1 were less effective in their planning. The writers who did use their L1 produced more details during the planning stage of L2 writing. Furthermore, the L1 facilitated more abstract thought during planning. Forlearners with lower levelof proficiency, writing can be a very complex activity due to difficulties they face in generating ideas in the second language, identifying the linguistic structures and using the appropriate vocabulary. In most cases students refer to their L1 in order to carry out the task. However, it is always believed that at lower level of proficiency, students tend to use L1 during L2 writing more than intermediate or advanced levels of proficiency students. Scott(1996) discusses the issue of lower level of proficiency students and he suggests allowing them to generate ideas in L1 and then help them to identify the linguistic structures that will transfer their ideas into the L2. Scott (1996) believes by doing this, the students with lower level of proficiencymay be able to come up with more ideas as otherwise they are bogged down by the confusion between linguistic information and ideas on the topic.

In Arabic language it is possible for both close and open to collocate with light and this indicates clear use of L1 during writing in L2. In general, students tend to make words or sentences in L1 first and then translate them into L2 and this is typical for lower level proficiency students.

Teachers may use L1 when introduce the major differences between L1 and L2, and the main grammatical characteristics that they should be aware of, to avoid students' confusion. Most students are not able to use Arabic language structure meaningfully. The role of teacher is to make them understand the structures by explaining it thoroughly, or by showing them the differences between Malay language structure and Arabic language structure. The explanation by using L2 thoroughly can cause misunderstanding. Therefore, in my opinion, the use of L1 is better to make the learning becomes more meaningful.

Conclusion

Arabic language learning is increasingly gaining a place in Malaysian society. Many people feel that Arabic is the language that hasto be learned because of its privileges as well as its importance in our daily life. Arabic language classes are also open in many schools and higher learning institutions. Many parents are aware of the importance of the Arabic language and they are racing to send their children to learn Arabic language. But to what extent the teaching of Arabic language in classroomsgives impact on the students? Will they be able to speak well and use the accurate and fluent Arabic language?

Teachers usually use Malay languagein Arabic classes to explain difficult concepts of grammar in order for students to easily understand linguistics terms because grammar is very intellectually demanding, it is a kind of "algebra of language". The use of L1 also may save teachers' time of explaining. They may directly translate the difficult words to the students' L1 to ensure that students understand unfamiliar words. Teachers also use L1 to ensure the comprehensibility of the Arabic contents they present. They attempt to make the learning process to be more comprehensible, more efficient and more effective. L1 may be used in appropriate way in teaching L2. The appropriate use of L1 in L2 classes will support the teaching practice especially in the teaching of writing and grammar.

Students usually use L1to mediate their learning, collaborate and seek each other's help during pair or group work and explain instructions and interact with others. Lower learners will get more benefit if teachers use L1 to translate unfamiliar words. They will feel free to ask their teachers whatever they do not understand.

Teaching speaking skill requires teachers to use L1 in all conditions. Teachers are not allowed to use L1 while teaching speaking. If the use of L1 is overused in teaching speaking, and it is not overcome, the mastery of Arabic language among students in Malaysia will be at a lower level and the ability to speak fluent Arabic languagemight be impossible.

Teachers may use L1 in effective and systematic way in teaching Arabic grammar, Arabic reading and Arabic writing. Teachers' reluctance to allow students to enquire about the new knowledge in Malay language could discourage students who may not be able to find the words in Arabic language.

Language teaching requires a continuous process and language itself should always be practiced in teaching and learning. This is to ensure that students have fully mastered all the required skills such as reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. Learning the language would be better if teachers are able to organize lesson plans effectively, use appropriate and effective techniques and methods of teaching and ensure lessons run properly.Teachers should also be able to identify students' level of achievement and thus play a vital role in encouraging students' interest to learn Arabic language in particular. Teachers must be wise when delivering knowledge and trying to communicate with students using onlyArabic language. Students must get accustomed to listen to Arabiclanguage and trying to communicate with their teachers. Teachers also must squeeze more energy to try to be active when delivering lessons. Teachers also must master the Arabic vocabulary, Arabic syntax and morphology, and so on to ensure the quality of their teaching can be guaranteed. Teachers must be sensitive to the surrounding factors that can assist students who are learning Arabic language to get valuable input for their learning.

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