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*The Use of the Learner's Mother Tongue in Teaching English*

**The Use of the Learner's Mother Tongue in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Some Libyan Elementary Schools**

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**Abstract:**

This study aimed to investigate the use of Arabic language for teaching English in Libyan elementary schools. It intended to investigate to what extent teachers of English use Arabic in their classes and their ways and reasons of doing that. The participants of this study were 30 teachers of English language at elementary schools. The data of this study was collected by using a questionnaire, a focus group discussion and observations. The results of this study suggest that the teacher participants highly use Arabic language in their English classrooms. Their main reason of using Arabic in their English classrooms is that using Arabic helps students understand grammar rules and the meaning of new words and expressions. The results also reveal that the students' level of English, the time assigned to the subject in combination with the intensity of the teaching material make many teachers resort to Arabic as a technique to cover the materials of their courses.

**Keywords:** English classes, Native Language (L1), Foreign Language (FL)

**المخلص**

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في استخدام اللغة العربية لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الابتدائية الليبية. تهدف هذه الدراسة أيضا في البحث إلى أي مدى يستخدم معلمون اللغة الإنجليزية اللغة العربية في فصولهم الدراسية والتعرف على طرقهم وأسبابهم في فعل ذلك. المشاركون في هذه الدراسة هم 30 معلماً للغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الابتدائية. تم جمع بيانات هذه الدراسة باستخدام

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استبيان ومناقشة جماعية مركزة وملاحظات. تشير النتائج إلى أن المشاركين من المدرسين يستخدمون اللغة العربية بشكل كبير في فصولهم الدراسية باللغة الإنجليزية. ويستخدمون اللغة العربية لمساعدة الطلاب على فهم القواعد النحوية ومعنى الكلمات والتعبيرات الجديدة للغة الانجليزية. ومن الأسباب الأخرى التي أدت الي اللجوء الأستاذة لاستخدام اللغة العربية هي ان المستوى الضعيف للطلاب في اللغة الإنجليزية والوقت القصير المخصص لخصص اللغة .

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** فصول اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة الام، اللغة الاجنبية

### **Introduction**

Teaching English has become a major and compulsory part of the curricula set by the educational authorities since 1946. Recently, adopting specialized elementary school policy has developed them. This trend aims at achieving new objectives of teaching English. They aimed at enabling the students to comprehend English in its all manifestation, training the students to develop their skills to understand specialized terms, and increasing the vocabulary and developing the desire of studying the language for higher studies. These objectives cope with the rapid growth and development of science and technology in all fields of life. For achieving the new mentioned objectives, the new curricula have mainly adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or as it is alternatively known "The Communicative Approach". This approach pays "Systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language" (Richard and Rodgers. 1996: 66). The aim behind learning is gaining communicative competence that enables the students to use the language in different contexts. They should be exposed to authentic situations that help them learn in social and

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group interaction. Therefore, the teaching materials are authentic language of various contexts that give the students opportunities to communicate.

Despite all the efforts exerted to improve the situation of teaching the foreign language in Libyan elementary schools, teachers seem to be unable to participate effectively in changes towards achieving improvement at least in the current conditions. This is due to many reasons. Most Libyan teachers in elementary schools have had no training, preparation and rehabilitation that help them to handle the new changes of the curricula effectively.

On the contrary, they still apply tradition techniques of old methods of teaching. (e.g. memorization of isolated words and translation of some vocabulary items). Moreover, they use the mother tongue excessively to cover the assigned materials in the specified time. Some of them are incompetent and many are unaware of CLT as a recommended approach.

Chung&Nation (2003) believe that the appropriate use of L1 in language classrooms might enhance the learning process of the target language.(Athinson, 1987) also supports the use of L1 in language classrooms, but he warns from its overuse as it might make learners feel that they cannot understand the input of the target until it is translated into their L1. On the other hand, Deller and Rinvolucrici (2002) believe that the use of first language could obstacle learners from learning a new language. Therefore, this study

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endeavor to investigate the use of L1 in an elementary school context to find out the teachers' views towards the use of L1 to teach a new language and their reasons for using it.

**Literature Review**

Some scholars and researchers believe that the use of mother tongue (L1) is helpful in learning a foreign or second language. They believe that L1 will assist teachers to the way for their students to learn the target language. On the other hand, others argue that using L1 might prevent students from learning the target language. The following sections presents the views of these scholars about the use of L1 in learning L2.

**The Grammar Translation Method (GTM)**

This method is still in use by many teachers around the world. Richards and Rodgers (1996:5) point out that "it is a method for which there is no theory" of language learning. The theoretical assumptions come from the interpretation of the FL or as Stern (1986:455) states "... as a system of rules to be observed in texts and sentences and to be related to first language meanings". According to GTM, learning language is viewed as "an understanding of the grammar of the language expressed in traditional terms, and at training the student to write the language accurately by regular practice in translating from the native language" (Rivers.1968:16). Learning a FL is considered as intellectual activity, which involves learning and memorization of rules and facts through massive

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translation from L1 into the FL and vice versa. Therefore, L1 is the vehicle on which the students and teachers heavily rely. L1 is maintained as the reference up on which the students build FL acquisition.

**The Direct Method (DM)**

Supporters of the DM have “a common belief that students learn to understand a language by listening to a great deal of it and that they learn to speak it by speaking it—associating speech with appropriate action” (Rivers. 1968:18). Whereas Richards and Rodgers (1997: 9) assume that “direct and spontaneous use of a foreign language in the class help the students to be able to induce rules of grammar.” Therefore, great exposure to FL in the class enables the students to develop the ability to think in FL through demonstration, using realia, mime and direct association between FL and meaning. Learning is viewed as “analogous to first language acquisition, and the learning process involved were often interpreted in terms of an associated psychology” (Stern.1996:459) Thus the purpose of learning according to the DM is to communication in FL. To achieve this, Freeman (1986:24) states that “in order to do this successfully, students should learn to think in the target language”.However, the L1 use is excluded as a technique in teaching FL.

**The Reading Method**

This method aims at teaching reading for the purpose of “correct pronunciation, comprehension of complicated spoken language, and

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the use of simple speech patterns" (Rivers1968:22). Students are trained to know meanings of words from context without conscious effort to translate what they read. Stern (1996:461) adds that "the spoken language was not entirely neglected, but it was the reading objective that received the main emphasis." Grammar is taught principally through the structures dealt with in the reading material. This indicates that the use of L1 do not have a significant role in learning a new language.

**The Audio- Lingual Method (ALM)**

New ideas about language and learning derived from descriptive linguistics and behavioral psychology were utilized in developing this method. As Brown (1983:70) points out "ALM was firmly grounded in linguistic and psychological theory." Throughout learning, students can develop oral competence. Thus listening and speaking receive a great emphasis in the teaching-learning process. Freeman (1986:43) believes that "students need to over learn the target language, to learn to use it automatically without stopping to think." Consequently, the students form new habits in the FL that help them overcome the old habits of their L1 gradually.

**Views in favour and against L1 use in FL Teaching**

Scholars and researcher of Applied Linguistics have always been advising teachers to use different techniques in teaching second languages. Throughout the history of teaching foreign languages, various techniques have been developed, and some were eradicated

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(e.g. reciting a list of isolated words or phrases). The effectiveness of any technique in the teaching– learning process gives it the validity to continue in use and to undergo improvements. On the other hand, teaching experience has proved that certain techniques (e.g. memorization of isolated words, translation of separate sentences) are deficient in practice so they have been cancelled and considered as a historical stage in teaching. Each technique also has its advocates and opponents who defend their viewpoints supported by evidence in practical logical ways. One of these techniques is using L1 in FL teaching.

Therefore, this section attempts to deal with the arguments and counter arguments of both the proponents and the opponents of the L1 use. Presentation of different opinions clarifies the situations where the L1 use would be a fruitful factor or a hindrance. For instance, proponents of the GTM think that L1 is the vehicle the students rely on to learn about the grammar and vocabulary of the FL. The students learn through translation from L1 to FL. They memorize any item given and its equivalent in their L1.

“The meaning of the target language is clear by translating it into the students’ native language” (Freeman.1986:12). L1 is used extensively in any class activities. To achieve accuracy. Students have to be trained to “extract the meaning from foreign texts by translation into the native language and, at advance stages, to appreciate the literary significance and value of what he has been

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reading” (Rivers, 1968: 16). L1 is the keystone of the learning and testing process.

The Modified DM gives a minor role to L1. A brief explanation of meaning of words and phrases that might be time consuming can be done in L1. Rivers (1981:35) being one of the advocates of this approach says “occasional translation of words and phrases as a check on comprehension of precise details in reading” can be done through L1. It offers clarification to some problems encountered by students and teachers.

In addition, some humanistic approaches, such CLL (Community Language Learning)) consider L1 as an aid the students depend on the express their feelings towards any learning item. Reduction of stress helps to obtain effective learning. Thus L1 is the background and the major source of knowledge students depends on.

Experts in methodology find reasons why teachers resort to L1 in teaching the FL. For instance, Spratt (in Todd. 1997: 27) thinks that teachers use L1 when “they need to clarify instruction, and when they want to release tension” (ibid). Certain factors affect the relative proportion of L1 and the FL in the classroom. For example, in classes where “the students’ previous experience of learning English may have involved heavy reliance on L1, suggesting that the proportion of English should be increased gradually” (Atkinson in Todd.1997: 26). Sometimes teachers of the FL may encounter situations where they find themselves unable to use the FL directly.



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Thus L1 helps them to convey meaning of the FL. As a result, the proportion of L1 increase. Moreover, Atkinson (1987:442) considers the L1 use as a "learner-preferred strategy" employed even without the teacher's encouragement. This strategy of translation/ transfer is a natural phenomenon studied by SLA experts. It is employed whenever learning occurs even informally.

As the use of L1 in teaching a new language has positive and negative effects in the learning process, this study intends to identify to what extent teachers of elementary schools in Libya use Arabic language which is L1 in their English classes. Another objective of this study is pinpointing the areas where the Arabic is widely used in the English lessons in some Libyan elementary schools. It also aims to finding out the reasons that compel the teachers to use L1 as a technique in the classroom.

**Methods**

**Participants of the Study**

Hatch (2002) maintains that choosing participants for a researcher's study based on the context and the methodology employed for his/her study. Thus all the teacher participants were chosen from three elementary schools located in Zawia city. The participants were 30 teachers (13 males and 17 females). Their age ranged from 25 to 46. Their experience of teaching English ranged from 2 years to 22 years. All of them have diploma in teaching English from Libyan High institutions and universities.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The data was collected by using three main tools which are a questionnaire, observations and a focus group discussion. The aim of using questionnaire is to understand the teachers use of Arabic language in their classrooms and to elicit their reasons for using Arabic. According to Allwright (1988: xvi), classroom observation is a "procedure for keeping a record of classroom events in such way that it can later be studied, typically either for teacher training or for research purposes and the data must be collected by explicit coding procedures (such as a set of categories according to which classroom events are classified." Thus Non-participant direct observation was used in this study based on the assumption that it is considered a reliable source of data, which can supplement other sources (e.g. interview, reading information). Teachers can be observed easily and authentic data about the actual teaching-learning process can recorded in the classroom. The observation is employed to see the real use of Arabic language in the English classrooms and in what ways teachers use it. The focus group discussion was utilized to know the teachers' views regarding using Arabic in their classroom and their reasons for doing that. All the teacher participants answered the questionnaire, seven of them were participated in the focus group discussion and only two of them were observed in the English classrooms. The quantitative data of the questionnaire was analyzed statistically while the qualitative data of

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the focus group discussion and the observations was analyzed by coding the data and putting these codes under specific themes which emerged from this data.

**Results and Discussion**

The findings of both the questionnaire and observation show that the teachers use excessively Arabic language in their classrooms. They also demonstrate that the teachers use L1 to give instructions in general, to explain grammar rules and to give the meaning of the difficult words and idiomatic expressions. The findings also clarify that the teachers use Arabic language to correct their students' errors and mistakes in both speaking and writing.

The teachers justified their excessive use of Arabic in their English classrooms by stating that they are enforced to do that for many reasons. These reasons are as follows.

**Helping their Students to Learn**

Most of the teachers believe that using Arabic language in their classrooms is helpful for their students to understand grammar rules of English. They also think that using Arabic also helps their students to comprehend the text and understand the meaning of the new words. Moreover, the teachers also believe that using Arabic assisting their students dealing with the exercises and the activities provided in the classroom. Some teachers stated that they use the Arabic to help weak students cope with the learning process. They think that the Arabic provides the simplest and easiest solutions to

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enable such students; otherwise, these students are going to be lost or frustrated.

**Weak Students Level of English**

The data also indicate that one of the main reasons mention by most of the teachers is that their students' level of English is weak. the teachers explain that most of their students struggle with grammar, and they do not have adequate knowledge of vocabulary which enable them to communicate with their teachers and their classmates. Thus teachers resort to use Arabic which help students to increase their comprehension of the English grammatical rules and their understanding of the meaning of English words.

**Short Time Allotted for English Classes**

The teachers also stated that they use Arabic in their classrooms as it would help them to save time. They stated that the time allotted to an English class is 45 minutes which is a short time for English class. They believe that if they would explain their lessons English they would spend long time until their students understand. Thus they resort to use Arabic.

**Helping Students to Pass the Exam**

Another reason stated by teachers is that using Arabic helps their students to understand the lessons and this would enable the students to do well in their exams. This indicates that the teachers care more about the exam than the learning process. the teachers' views might be rooted to their experience as students.

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### **Creating a Good Learning Environment**

The teachers believe that using Arabic would help them to make a good environment for learning. They believe that using Arabic would help them to motivate their students to learn. It also makes students feel comfortable asking questions, making mistakes and taking risks in order to learn something new. The teachers mentioned that using Arabic help them to make the students interact and collaborate with each other, and this reflect positively on their learning.

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to research the use of Arabic language by teachers of English at preparatory schools in Libya. The results suggest employing L1 as a technique to a great extent by many teachers of elementary schools because a lot of obstacles compel teachers to resort to such a procedure. The new curricula with its new approach, the level of the students, lack of motivation of both teachers and students represent serious difficulties. The inadequate time assigned to the subject as a whole and the examination policy of all levels are also of great importance. All of the previous difficulties seem to lead to underachievement of students and teachers. The exposure to the FL is reduced to which the students are obviously in need. The majority of the FL teachers have had no training during their professional life. Lack of encouragement to distinguished teachers is considered another crucial reason. All what has been mentioned in addition to the research's considerable experience in teaching the FL

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at different levels have supported the research to draw upon the following conclusions.

1. Teachers of the FL in some Libyan elementary schools have positive attitude towards using L1 in the FL lessons to a very great extent. This has its impact on the teaching-learning process in general and on the achievement of the students in particular.
2. The majority of the teachers prefer L1 as the easiest and simplest technique.
3. Many teachers of the FL tend to use L1 widely in dealing with vocabulary items, difficult abstract items, grammatical structures, and corrections in general and getting feedback. This has its effect on the general achievement and mastery of the language for the long term.
4. Less experienced teachers represent the majority in applying this procedure.
5. Teachers tend to follow limited techniques and activities, which is attributed to their unawareness, lack of motivation and carelessness sometimes.
6. Most elementary schools do not have any teaching aids, language laboratories and other facilitating equipment.
7. The students' attitude towards learning the FL is not high to cope with the new changes of curricula of elementary schools.

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