

The Use of Arabic in Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages for Saudi Language Learners: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of first-language (L1) use in teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) from the perceptions of learners and instructors in Saudi Arabia. Although this issue has been studied in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), less commonly spoken languages in Saudi Arabia have not received as much attention from scholars. 60 undergraduate students who have passed beginner levels in the Department of Chinese at the University of Jeddah were given a questionnaire. Five focus groups were organized, each consisting of five students, and one that included the only two instructors in the department, to gather data about participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to the topic. The findings suggest that using L1 for instruction and communication in CFL classrooms is essential in the first stages of learning the language, and that the learning process can take two years, due to the uniqueness of the language. Although the systematic and purposeful use of L1 has already been encouraged in the context of learning EFL, this approach could potentially be used in CFL classrooms after the students have successfully acquired basic language skills.

Keywords: foreign language classroom, L1 (Arabic), L2 (Mandarin Chinese), use of L1

1. Introduction

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education has been concerned with integrating foreign languages into its educational systems to address issues brought on by the country's rapid political, social, and economic growth. Accordingly, English—the international language for commerce, science, and technology—was first taught in public schools in 1970, initially in grade 7 onward, for a total of six years. Between 2000 and 2014, English was gradually implemented as a compulsory subject in all primary schools (Elyas, 2008).

Significant Saudi business deals with China, in various fields, have also prompted interest in the integration of Mandarin Chinese into the Saudi educational system, with several schools and colleges beginning to offer Chinese courses in 2020. However, unlike English, which Saudi learners consider a familiar language, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) is challenging to teach because of its distinctive features and its relative unfamiliarity in Saudi society. The linguistic differences between Chinese and Arabic, in almost all aspects, are considerable (Alshammari, 2020). For example, the modern Chinese logographic writing system, which has about 2,500 common characters, is difficult for beginners to learn (Huang, 2009). Another problematic area for Saudi learners is the Chinese use of tones to convey meaning, a characteristic not found in Arabic. As the need for multilingualism grows in Saudi Arabia, academics have become interested in studying the challenges that language learners may face, in order to develop pedagogical strategies for their instructional programs.

The use of the first language (L1) in teaching or learning a foreign language has long been a central theoretical question in the field of second language acquisition. Discussions of this issue generally refer to instructors and learners sharing the same language. Some studies support this approach, others reject it, and still others encourage the limited use of L1.

This article explores the extent to which Arabic could be used in CFL classrooms for teaching and learning, from the perspectives of the instructors and learners. Although most studies in this field are widely concerned with English as a foreign language (EFL), findings from these projects could be used to build an understanding of different views and to reach a conclusion in the context of this study.

2. Literature Review

This section outlines different views on the use of the first language in a foreign or second language classroom, in order to determine the various perspectives from which this topic may be approached.

One such approach is the Grammar Translation Method, which, according to Lightbown and Spada (2013:154), “has its origin in the teaching of classical languages (for example, Greek and Latin). The original purpose of this approach was to help students read literature rather than to develop fluency in the spoken language.” This approach prioritizes reading and writing over speaking and listening, and the class is mainly handled by the instructor (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

A Reform Movement arose in the late nineteenth century, with the goal of developing new paradigms for teaching languages (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). One issue that has generated debate among these reformers is the use of L1 in foreign language instruction. Some argued that learners should use their cognitive capacities to comprehend the meaning of the target language without combining the two languages, while others emphasized the value of L1, especially when presenting new concepts (Howatt, 2004).

The Direct Method, developed in response to the Grammar Translation Method, emphasizes the importance of exposure to the target language directly and in everyday situations to enable learners to speak and understand the language. Advocates of this approach believe that “the target language is acquired in the same way as the mother tongue language (L1)” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Stern (1992:291), for instance, indicates that “intralingual techniques are intended to help create intralingual association. They are also meant to help learners to link L2 to concrete objects, situational context, and the external world in general.”

The Audiolingual Method likewise strongly insists on avoiding the usage of L1. According to this approach, the target language and native language should not be connected, as they are two separate systems (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), and any connection between them would risk negative interference of L1 in the L2 learning process (Cook, 2001). Brooks (1964) stressed the importance of speaking and listening over reading and writing, since memorization and repetition are essential parts of learning languages. However, this approach has several disadvantages. First, adults over time lose the intrinsic capacity that children use in acquiring their L1. Second, in contrast to youngsters, who lack prior knowledge of their mother tongue, adults draw on their L1 while learning L2. In addition, adult exposure to L2 is less ideal than that of children since such exposure is limited to educational contexts. According to BleyVroman (1990), these disparities between adults and children may explain why adults frequently struggle with L2 fluency, more than children do.

The ban on using L1 in L2 education is also supported by Krashen (1981), who proposed that learners can pick up languages implicitly through direct exposure to those that contain (i+1), where “‘i’ represents the level of language already acquired, and the ‘+1’ is a metaphor for language (words, grammatical forms, aspects of pronunciation) that is just a step beyond that level” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013:106). For Halliwell and Jones (1991), risk taking is a crucial component of language acquisition, especially when practicing speaking and trying to understand the message regardless of understanding the exact meaning of words and structures. Communicative Language Teaching, like the approaches outlined above, was developed to encourage students to communicate and express themselves in L2. Advocates of this approach argue that “it is better to encourage learners to develop ‘fluency’ before ‘accuracy’” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013:157).

On the other hand, the New Concurrent Method is a teaching strategy that purposefully uses L1. Teachers using this strategy must balance usage of L1 and L2 (Faltis, 1990). Codeswitching that aids in language acquisition should be systematic and meant for specific purposes, such as introducing topics, revisiting a prior lesson, getting students' attention, and rewarding students (Faltis, 1990). L1 might also be used when addressing the issue of learners' competency. With students of poor ability, teachers tend to employ L1 more often than they would with students showing greater proficiency (Dickson, 1996). In addition to students' performance, instructors' professional experience affects how much they use L1; as they gain more experience, they will use L1 less frequently (Crawford, 2004). Research has demonstrated that using students' L1 in classrooms, particularly in beginner and intermediate classrooms, generates an effective learning experience (Tang, 2002; Schweers, 1999). Schweers (1999) has noted that using Spanish (L1) in her L2 classroom improved students' attitudes toward, and motivation about, the English-language learning process.

Other comparable approaches that link L1 and L2 are the Reciprocal Language Teaching Method (Hawkins, 1981) and Dodson's (1967) Bilingual Method, which strive to prepare skilled pupils and native speakers of both L1 and L2. The Task-Based Method (Willis & Willis, 2007), in which learners can copy words from the worksheet and use gestures to communicate in L2 when working in groups of two or more to accomplish a task, uses L1 only minimally. L1 might be used as a last resort, as reported by Prabhu (1987:60): “Although tasks were presented and carried out in the target language, the use of the learner’s mother tongue in the classroom was neither disallowed nor excluded.”

Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) reveal that L1 offers “cognitive assistance” for L2 learners during language analysis and in performing tasks that require cognitive demands. They further indicate that using L1 may create interest among L2 learners and make difficult tasks more manageable. From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky proposed scaffolding as an important teaching tool that can support learners’ cognitive development within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), “a metaphorical location or ‘site’ in which learners co-construct knowledge in collaboration with an interlocutor” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013: 118). In line with this perspective, L1 is used as a scaffolding tool, and the degree of individualized assistance depends on the learner’s ZPD, in order to lower affective filters and to make the class materials more comprehensible (Meyer, 2008). Machaal (2012) reported that instructors can use L1 to assist students’ learning process and progress, and to ensure their comprehension of both texts and sentences. Additionally, L1 may be used to encourage “cooperative learning” when students perform a task in a group of two or more to discuss ideas, to seek clarification, to translate unfamiliar terms, to learn new terminologies in L2, and to comprehend abstract ideas and concepts (Machaal, 2012), as long as the final production of the task is presented in the target language. In the context of Kuwait, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) recommend the systematic use of L1 depending on students’ progress: it should be limited, and should diminish as students' expertise with the target language grows.

Most studies in the Saudi context relating to the use of L1 in foreign language classrooms specifically focus on English classes. Al-Nofaie's (2010) examination of a Saudi female intermediate school revealed that both instructors and students were enthusiastic about the systematic usage of Arabic in EFL lessons, especially in explaining grammatical rules and new terminology and while working within a group to perform an in-class activity. Furthermore, Alshammari's (2011) investigation of EFL in two Saudi technical colleges revealed

that EFL teachers and students use Arabic (L1) in the classroom for clarification purposes, aiming to enhance learners' comprehension, engagement, and participation; however, Alshammari recommended that such use should be balanced and systematic. Almohaimeed and Almurshed (2018) studied the use of Arabic (L1) in English classes in relation to college students' English proficiency levels. Their findings revealed that advanced students had an unfavorable view of the use of their L1 in English classrooms, but primary and intermediate students had predominantly positive attitudes about the deliberate use of their L1 in teaching new terms and complicated grammar. However, the differences in opinions on this topic among students at the same level demonstrated that other personal and social elements may impact those sentiments, as the focus group discussions showed. At a private institution in Saudi Arabia, Eljishi, Tylor, and Shehata (2022) assessed the effectiveness of monolingual instruction compared to bilingual instruction. Monolingual instruction produced more side conversations and less participation and showed signs of uncertainty and misunderstanding of the subjects being taught; conversely, the students were more engaged in bilingual instruction. Furthermore, students with poor English skills were said to have a language barrier that can be overcome by using their L1 purposefully. Accordingly, the study suggested hiring more bilingual instructors to facilitate students' learning processes.

Based on the literature review and previous studies, this paper discusses the extent to which the use of the mother tongue (L1) is efficient among Saudi learners of Mandarin Chinese. It is meant to fill the gap in investigating teaching and learning languages that are rarely spoken in Saudi Arabia. The results may provide information on best educational practices for practitioners and educators in this field, especially with the Saudi ministry of education's inclusion of Chinese language programs in the Saudi educational system.

3. Methodology

The bachelor's program in the recently-established department of Chinese at the University of Jeddah consists of four years. The first year encompasses general university courses; the second and third years provide education in the basic skills of the Chinese language; and the fourth year features specialized courses. Two undergraduate groups, 30 students from the third year and 30 students from the fourth year, were selected to answer a questionnaire. According to the HSK, the international standardized proficiency test of the Chinese language for non-native speakers, the third-year students' level is equivalent to level 4 (intermediate), and the fourth-year students' level is equivalent to level 5 (low advanced), as reported by an instructor in the department. In other words, both groups have passed the beginner level successfully. All participants started learning Chinese from scratch, as they had no prior exposure to the language before enrolling in the university's Chinese major program.

The questionnaire provided to these students was designed to investigate the following points:

1. The importance of the use of Arabic in CFL classrooms;
2. Reasons for the use of L1 as an instructional tool in CFL classrooms;
3. Reasons for the use of L1 as a communicational tool in CFL classrooms.

To elicit more in-depth information about students' views towards the use of Arabic in the classroom at different stages of their learning journey, and their reasons for using the first language in CFL classrooms, five focus groups, with five students each, were also organized, in addition to one focus group that included the only two instructors in the department. One of these instructors is Sudanese, and the other is half Saudi and half Chinese; both speak Arabic fluently. For confidentiality, participants in this study are referred to by their initials.

The focus group approach is essential in language acquisition research because it allows for the collection of rich and thorough data about language learners' views, opinions, and experiences. Since language learning is a complicated and varied process that incorporates numerous cognitive, emotional, and social components, this approach can help scholars investigate these aspects in greater depth and find patterns and themes that may not emerge from other approaches such as surveys or experiments (Dornyei, 2007).

Furthermore, focus groups may be important tools for reviewing and enhancing language education materials, programs, and techniques to enable instructors to discover areas for improvement and to better match learners' needs and preferences.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis will explore the importance of using L1 in CFL classrooms as a tool of instruction and communication. When the respondents were asked about using L1 in their Chinese classrooms, a large majority (88.3%) either strongly agreed or agreed that using L1 in the classroom is beneficial to a large extent, and (11.7%) took a neutral position. Table 1 explores possible reasons why Saudi learners of Chinese would use L1 in the classroom.

Table 1. Reasons for using L1 in CFL classrooms

Reasons for using the first language in the classroom for Saudi learners of Chinese	Strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
Explaining new vocabulary	81.7	16.7	0	1.7	0
Understanding grammatical rules of the Chinese language	81.7	16.7	0	1.7	0
Understanding difficult exercises	81.7	13.3	1.7	1.7	1.7
Reducing feelings of anxiety for second language learners	68.3	20	1.7	1.7	8.3
Clarifying instructions for exercises and tests	80	16.7	3.3	0	0
Comprehending the Chinese logographic writing system	55	28.3	8.3	5	3.3
Showing the similarities and differences between Arabic and Chinese	18.3	18.3	16.7	45	1.7
Mastering pronunciation of the tonal system of Chinese	18.3	18.3	21.7	26.7	15
Facilitating communication with other classmates when working in a group to perform a specific task	51.7	26.7	8.3	11.7	1.7
Facilitating communication when talking to the course instructor	48.3	31.7	13.3	5	1.7
Adding fun, especially if the lesson is boring	46.7	35	10	5	3.3
Helping learners to concentrate during lectures	50	35	6.7	6.7	1.7
Ensuring that learners understood the course materials correctly	76.7	18.3	1.7	3.3	0

As shown in table 1, Saudi learners of Mandarin Chinese perceive using L1 in the classroom positively for various reasons, including explaining new vocabulary, understanding grammatical rules and difficult exercises, reducing anxiety, and clarifying instructions for different tasks and tests. More in-depth investigation with the students during the focus group sessions explored the areas of difficulty for which they found the use of Arabic in the classroom helpful. Most of the discussions with students during these sessions addressed the uniqueness of the Chinese grammatical system, with different sentence structures and word orders than those found in other languages with which the students are familiar. One of the participants (RA) indicated that “when they first started to learn Chinese, it was a shock because they could hardly cope with the difficulty of the language.” She indicated that using L1 made them feel more at ease and competent in the classroom, particularly at the beginning of the program, and it gave them the motivation to continue learning the language.

Another area of difficulty the students identified is the Chinese logographic writing system, which they found challenging to remember and recognize, due to their lack of familiarity with Chinese characters. According to one of the instructors, “Chinese characters are an essential part of the language, and Chinese language instruction typically involves much practice reading and writing characters.” One of the participants (HS) said “learning Chinese characters involves memorization of stroke order, learning common radicals, and studying the meanings and pronunciation of individual characters, which take a long time, especially when we started learning the language.” In addition, almost all of the students expressed difficulty with Chinese vocabulary, as many Chinese words and expressions do not have direct equivalents in Arabic or other languages. For instance, one participant (AA) indicated that using L1 to understand different aspects of the language’s foundations can help students obtain a better grasp of the language and save time in the classroom by helping them quickly clarify misunderstandings and ask questions. Another participant (NM) mentioned that learning Chinese involves not only the language itself, but also the culture. Using L1 can help learners bridge the gap between their own culture and that of the Chinese-speaking world, and better understand the context and significance of Chinese language use. Due to the similarities between Chinese characters, five of the participants (MB, EM, JZ, AM, HJ) felt that L1 is necessary when explaining instructions for exercises and assessments. The incorrect interpretation of one character's meaning may cause students to misunderstand the instructions and not provide the proper answer.

It is interesting to note that the item related to the similarities and differences between Arabic and Chinese received a relatively high percentage of “neutral” and “disagree” responses. One of the instructors said “The two languages are totally different, so learners feel it is not necessary to understand the similarities and differences between the two languages because it is not relevant to the learning process. They rather prefer other effective methods, such as direct explanation and translation.” The item relating to pronunciation of the tonal system of Chinese showed a similar variation, having received more neutral or negative responses than other items. This may be because pronunciation is a particularly challenging aspect of learning Chinese, and learners may prefer exposure to native speakers of the language. Several participants (HS, JM, HO, MR) said that mastering the different tones used in the language is particularly problematic for non-native speakers learning Chinese. They further indicated that using L1 to clarify the tones and pronunciation may help them better understand the nuances of Chinese pronunciation. However, they face problems of miscommunication when talking to native speakers because they have not yet mastered the correct pronunciation. Two of the participants (MR, AT) mentioned that “the problem [is that] we can understand each other but we find difficulty in understanding a native speaker unless there are subtitles when watching a TV show, for example.” They attribute this problem to their limited exposure to native speakers who speak more quickly than what they are accustomed to in their classrooms. Accordingly, they find having a Chinese instructor beneficial in listening and speaking classes; however, they prefer using English for communication with the instructor. The Sudanese instructor had also the same opinion on this point because she noticed the effect of L1 on their accent and their pronunciation when speaking in Chinese; she said, “the issue with the Chinese language is that the incorrect pronunciation results in the production of the incorrect term, which may lead to misunderstanding.” Accordingly, she recommends interaction with a native instructor, to accustom students to listening to a native speaker and help them attempt to emulate the speaker’s precise pronunciation.

The importance of using L1 for communication between learners when performing a task, or between learners and their instructors, received positive responses. Using L1 for communication in CFL classrooms is beneficial in several significant ways. For example, one of the participants (AT) said, “there is a saying we used to say when we do not understand something: ‘Are you talking Chinese?’ I have just understood this saying because it is a very difficult language; however, using L1 enables us to understand and communicate with the instructor and communicate with each other.” Most of the participants indicated that using Arabic allowed them to overcome the anxiety that might accompany learning a distinctive language such as Chinese: “We can ask questions when we don’t understand in class, and it encourages us to participate in class discussions. It also facilitates communication with other classmates when working in a group to perform a specific task,” as reported by three of the participants (AT, RA, MR). Table 1 shows that the item relating to adding fun to lessons received positive responses, as learners feel that the use of their first language makes lectures more engaging and enjoyable.

The majority of the low advanced participants believe that they have reached a point at which they can rely on their understanding of the Chinese language and increasingly use it in place of L1. They have mastered reading and writing more than listening and speaking, which can only be enhanced via exposure to the language; they also believe that they need to overcome their fear of using the language. They have reached the last year in their major and have started to use the language both in the classroom and on WhatsApp. These participants mentioned that their next step after graduation would be getting a scholarship to study in China in order to gain full exposure to the language.

The instructors identified several reasons why using L1 in the classroom is helpful. First, L1 use can help teachers explain grammatical rules and pronunciation patterns more accurately and clearly to learners, particularly those who are new to the language. Chinese language instruction often emphasizes the importance of grammar because it is the basis for other skills, and learners need to understand the underlying rules and patterns of the language. Second, the use of L1 can help teachers more effectively convey the cultural contexts behind certain words and phrases, as the Chinese language and culture are closely intertwined. Third, L1 can help teachers save time in the classroom, and help learners more quickly understand and process information.

One of the instructors mentioned that:

In the second and the third year in the major, students take four levels of the basic skills of the Chinese language. Using Arabic during this period is important because it helps teachers to establish a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, particularly for learners who may feel overwhelmed or anxious about learning a new language. Their need for L1 is because they are studying Chinese as a foreign language; meaning, the classroom is the only place where they are exposed to the language. During this period, they are always introduced to new grammatical structures and new vocabulary and concepts. In the last year, they started using the language gradually, but still we use L1 whenever they are introduced to new grammatical structures or terminologies.

From her personal experience, the other instructor said:

When I was learning Chinese in the university, we had a Chinese instructor for one of the courses. We used to ask senior students after class about the issues discussed in class for the sake of clarifications, or we used to rely on ourselves which might take us a long time to understand although English was used in class as a medium of instruction and communication, and it was also used in Chinese language textbooks to explain vocabulary and grammatical rules.

These responses demonstrate that the theoretical approaches that ban the use of the first language in foreign language classrooms are not applicable in the case of teaching Chinese due to several factors that will be discussed in the next section. Both instructors indicated that due to their previous experience in learning the language, they can predict the areas of difficulty that Saudi learners may experience, and in doing so can facilitate the teaching process.

Both instructors pointed out that in the senior year, the use of L1 is limited to clarifying new grammatical structures or unfamiliar concepts or vocabulary. By using L1, instructors can provide additional explanations and make sure the students clearly understand the content. They added that although the use of L1 can be beneficial in certain situations, it should not be overused or relied upon exclusively with the low advanced students, since the goal of language learning is to develop proficiency in L2, and students should be encouraged to use and practice L2 as much as possible.

The next section critically discusses these findings in relation to the literature review, to draw important conclusions about the aims of this study.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The literature review and data analysis reveal critical elements in determining the degree and extent to which L1 can and should be used in foreign language classroom instruction. The first factor is the nature of the language and the exposure to it. For English learners, L1 is used as a scaffolding tool, and the degree of individualized assistance depends on the learner’s zone of proximal development. Despite the vast differences between English and Arabic, students are exposed to English early: in schools, in the media, and on social media. Arabic and Chinese, on the other hand, are two distinct and very different languages. The Arabic alphabet, which consists of 28 letters and is written from right to left, is the primary script used to write Arabic. Arabic is well-known for its sophisticated grammatical rules, which include a system of trilateral roots and patterns used to build words and communicate meaning (Holes, 2004). In contrast, Chinese is written with a logographic writing system, in which each symbol represents a word or notion. Chinese is recognized for its tonal system,

in which the tone of a word's pronunciation may change its meaning (Chao, 1968). It is worth noting that the students who participated in this study had no prior exposure to Chinese; accordingly, the excessive use of L1 in the classroom, particularly in the first stages of learning the language, is considered a facilitating tool in teaching and learning the language rather than a scaffolding tool. Code switching between the learner's first language and second languages such as English is meant for specific purposes, such as explaining terminology, grammatical rules, or instructions for a test (Mohamed and Mohamad, 2014). In this case, the target language is used for instruction and the first language is used for specific purposes. On the other hand, for Saudi learners of Chinese, Arabic is mainly used for instruction in the first two years of the program, to explain and translate grammatical rules and vocabulary, and to clarify the Chinese tonal and writing systems.

The skills being learned make up a second factor. For example, the learners prefer a bilingual instructor who shares their first language in subjects related to grammar, vocabulary, writing, and reading comprehension. An instructor who is a native speaker of L2 is necessary in subjects related to listening and speaking, so that students can improve their pronunciation and communication with native speakers of the language, but English should still be used as a language of instruction and communication inside the classroom.

Another important consideration is the potential for variation in the perceived benefits of using L1 depending on the level of language proficiency and the specific stage of language learning. For example, as Almohaimed and Almurshed (2018) have indicated, beginners or lower-level learners of English may be more likely to benefit from the systematic use of L1 for understanding new vocabulary and basic grammatical concepts, while more advanced learners may negatively perceive the use of L1. On the other hand, Saudi learners of Chinese and their instructors considered the excessive use of L1 a valuable tool for learners to better understand and master the language while learning basic skills. For low advanced learners, Arabic could be used as a scaffolding tool to explore more complex or nuanced aspects of the language.

The use of L1 in Chinese language classrooms can be beneficial for communication in several ways. First, it allows students to clarify any misunderstanding or language barriers they may be experiencing. It is common for students to struggle with understanding new vocabulary or grammatical structures when learning a second language, and using L1 can help them better comprehend the meaning and context of what is being taught. Second, using L1 can assist students in gaining confidence. When students feel more comfortable and confident in their ability to communicate, they are more likely to participate in class discussions and ask questions, which can lead to a more engaging and interactive learning experience. Such participation can help them deepen their understanding of the target language and improve their overall language skills. However, after having mastered the basic skills of the language, students started to gradually use the target language to practice what they have learned in class, and they also started to use it in actual or virtual communication with their classmates.

By taking these factors into account, language instructors can tailor their instructional approaches to the specific needs and preferences of their learners and can help learners maximize the benefits of using L1 at each stage of the language learning process.

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