

# Why teachers use *Bahasa* in the Arabic language classroom?

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**Abstract:** The use of the target language has long been considered an important principle of second language (L2) instruction. Previous research has attempted to quantify the amount of the first language (L1) used in the classroom and has explored the purposes or functions of teachers' 'lapses' into their students' L1. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the attitudes towards using L1 in Arabic classes among teachers of secondary school in Malaysia which consists of students speaking *Bahasa* as their L1. Data was collected based on the interviews of the teachers that teach Arabic language in a school. The respondents of this study were two experienced teachers. The findings indicated that L1 is still used by the teachers to explain difficult concepts of grammar so that students easily understand linguistics terms, and also to translate new words to ensure that students understand unfamiliar words.

**Keywords:** First language, target language, Arabic classroom, secondary school

## Introduction

The issues on whether to use or not to use students' first language (L1) in second language (L2) classroom have generated increasingly 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 L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002), present new vocabularies, explain difficult grammar and give instructions as well as suggestions (Mirza, Mahmud, & Jabbar,

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2012). According to Cole (1998), L1 is most useful for novices since students at this level have little or no knowledge about L2. It also can 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 to learning L2 and it also prevents the student from acquiring the valuable input in the L2 (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Although there are a number of studies discussed the use of L1 in EFL classroom, but a few studies have explored the issues from the perspective of the Arabic as a second/foreign language classroom. Hassan Basri (2005) found that many teachers have yet to use Arabic thoroughly in their teaching. Teachers do not emphasize on the listening and speaking skills and they assume that those skills are not important. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the attitudes towards using L1 in Arabic classes among teachers of secondary school in Malaysia which consists of students speaking Bahasa as their L1.

## **Literature Review**

### *Arabic Language in the Malaysian Context*

The compulsory educational system in Malaysia is divided in two stages: primary education which starts from standard 1 to standard 6 (from 7 years old to 12 years old), and secondary education which covers from form 1 to form 5 (from 13 years old to 17 years old). These two stages are applied in the public and private schools. Arabic is a foreign language in Malaysia and a subject that is taught as a school subject only like other subjects in the syllabus and it is not generally used as a communication tool.

### *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 teacher have the opinion that L1 may be used under certain limitations and appropriate (Cole, 1998) and others feel that L1 should not be allowed at all because it prevents students to learn L2 (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Nazary (2008) asserted 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 (Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method (DM), Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Methods).

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 target 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 to grammar-translation classes. One is to develop students' reading ability to a level where they can read literature in the target language (Richards & 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 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 language. The general goal of the direct method is to provide learners with a practically useful knowledge of language. They should learn to speak and understand the target 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 was similar to the direct method. Like the direct method, the audio-lingual method advised that students 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 didn't focus on teaching vocabulary. Rather, the teacher drilled students in the use of 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 to Hamdallah (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 & 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 classroom 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)Nation, P. (2003). The role of the first language in foreign language learning. *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(2), 1-8argued that the L1 play 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 out ways to use L1 into the L2 teaching efficiently. For instants, Tang (2002) often use L1 in low and medium proficiency level in English classes to give instructions, explain meanings of words, explain complex ideas and explain complex grammar points. Alshammari (2011) argues that the use of L1 can save teachers' time of explaining, increase students' understanding and make the learning process more effective.

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 & İrgin, 2009). The communication between teachers and students become easier(Nation, 2003). Accordingly, students feel free to ask their teachers.

#### *Teachers' attitudes towards L1 use in the L2 classroom*

There have been a number of researches on the use of L1 in L2 classes. Harbord (1992) for example, indicated that many second language teachers have attempted to create English-only classrooms but unfortunately, it led to students misunderstanding. He, therefore, drew the conclusion to use translation method to make student understand

better. This view was in line with researches done by 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 toward using L1 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 comprehend the new language, and for specific reasons. For instance, L1 was used to explain grammatical terms, introduce new vocabulary and give exam instructions. 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 classroom seems not to affect students' exposure to the L2. It may be needed to increase students' comprehension.

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

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

The study was carried out in a Religious National Secondary School in Kelantan, Malaysia. For selecting the school and the participants, a purposive sampling was applied. The study included two experienced teachers and one classroom of 30 students.

### *Research Instrument and Procedures for Data Collection*

Interviews method was applied for data collection. Teachers' attitudes were investigated qualitatively through semi-structured interviews only due to their small number. The interviews required the interviewees to clarify their attitudes towards employing *Bahasa* and explain their reasons for accepting or rejecting *Bahasa*. The interviewees' responses were recorded during the interviews.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### *Teachers' reasons for employing Bahasa*

Teachers had various reasons for employing *Bahasa* in Arabic classroom. They usually use *Bahasa* to explain difficult words for low achieving students, so that they do not fail to keep pace with their peers. According to a 15 years experienced teacher:

We can use first language when necessary and appropriate to retain some degree of interest in the classroom. For example, when we want to make a joke, we have to switch to L1 to clarify situation. We are also bound to use L1 when the subject is new and the vocabulary is also new especially when we teach low achieving students.

Another reason which was found from the interviews was the students' level. The two interviewed teachers agreed that novices need more explanation in *Bahasa* because they have not made good progress in Arabic yet.

This finding seem to be consistent with the previous studies which found that using L1 with the beginners or lower level students was an important factor in enhancing teachers' use of L1 (see (Dickson, 1996; Franklin, 1990).

#### *Situations in which teachers prefer using Bahasa*

Teachers usually use *Bahasa* to explain difficult concepts of grammar so that students more easily understand linguistics terms and also it may save their time of explaining. This result is in line with many existing studies. For example, Al-Abdan (1993) and Al-Nofaie (2010) found that many teachers have employed native language for explaining grammar.

Using L1 for interpreting the meaning of words was another factor that increase teachers' use L1. Turnbull(2001) stressed that teachers may translate new words to the L1 to ensure that students understand unfamiliar words. When L1 is not used especially when teachers try to explain the unfamiliar words or concept, the level of anxiety among students will increase(Meyer, 2008). This finding was confirmed by the interviews and the observations. A 10-years experienced teacher said:

“I have to use L1 as my medium of instruction, so that I can explain more and this saves my time in explaining unfamiliar or unknown words. If I taught in Arabic thoroughly, I have to repeat the same word more than three times and I don't think that students will understand me. So, it wastes my time. I only used 20% of Arabic in teaching and 80% of Bahasa.

This teacher has to use L1 to ensure the comprehensibility of the Arabic contents she presents. She attempts to make the learning process more comprehensible, more efficient and more effective and also can save her time of explaining. This finding was in line with many previous studies that supported the use of L1 in L2 class to convey the meaning of an unfamiliar word and to explain difficult concepts(Cole, 1998; Cook, 2001; Meyer, 2008).

#### *Implications of the use of Bahasa in Teaching of Arabic*

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

Krashen & Terrell (1983) mainly focus on the meaning and the ability to communicate because they assume that communication is the main function of language. They emphasize to the importance of vocabulary and see that language as a tool to communicate and convey the meaning of the message. Therefore, language acquisition is only possible when people are able to understand a message in the second language they learnt.

The result shows that the percentage of using *Bahasa* language in the teaching of Arabic is still high. Teachers and educators still prefer using the native language while teaching Arabic. If this still happen and it is not overcome, then the mastery of Arabic among students in Malaysia will be at a low level and the ability to speak Arabic is very difficult to be implemented.

Language teaching requires a continuous process and language itself should always be practiced in teaching and learning. This is to ensure that students fully master 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 appropriately and effectively 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 the correct Arabic completely. Students must get accustomed to listening to Arabic, 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, *balaghah* and so on to ensure the quality of their teaching. Teachers must be sensitive to the surrounding factors that can help Arabic students get valuable input for their learning.

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