

# The Effect of Using L1 in EFL Classrooms: The Case of Iraqi EFL Primary School Learners

Mayada Rafea Awad<sup>a</sup>, Lihadh A. Mubarak<sup>b\*</sup>, Mammon Sami Saleh<sup>c</sup>,  
<sup>a</sup>M.A. Candidate, University of Babylon, <sup>b,c</sup>College of Education for Human Sciences, Dept. of English Language, University of Babylon-Iraq, Email:  
<sup>b\*</sup>[hum.lihadh.abdual@uobabylon.edu.iq](mailto:hum.lihadh.abdual@uobabylon.edu.iq)

The use of the first language (L1) in EFL classrooms is one of the most controversial issues in English teaching. The present study is an attempt to find out the effect of using Arabic, as an L1, on the pupils' exam achievement. It first reviews the role of L1 under some major language teaching methods. Then it presents the rationale for using L1 in English language teaching classrooms. This includes motivation, psychological effects and the influence of L1 on second language acquisition. The current study is an experimental one in which a comparison between two groups was made: one group was taught using Arabic, and the other was taught using only English. The results of the study revealed that there is a positive effect of using Arabic in EFL classrooms on the learners' answers in the post-tests.

**Keywords:** *Iraqi EFL Learners, L1 use in EFL classrooms, teaching process, Language acquisition*

## Introduction

EFL teaching is always affected by sociocultural factors. Many Arab pupils, attending EFL classes, come from the background where English is unknown. Although they are taught English in their primary and secondary schools; they are taught English only as a formality. Pupils, as well as teachers, take EFL lightly. They only think of the marks they need to pass the examination. Moreover, they prepare for the EFL examination by memorising, so they do not learn the language. Consequently, they spend their valuable years in schools without actually acquiring the English language. When they come to university or take admission in professional courses like medicine, nursing, computer science, engineering, etc., they need to have an accepted competence in the English language. At this stage, English becomes a crucial need for them. At this problematic stage, only an intelligent and competent teacher

may come for their rescue. If a pupil does not get a competent teacher, she or he would lose his interest in learning English.

In addition, talking about language teaching or language learning, the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are involved. Therefore, all these four skills are essential and should be taught with equal emphasis. These four skills are related to each other. No one particular skill is more important than the others. The four skills are strongly connected and cannot be separated from one another. The method and the style of teaching each of the four skills are different though.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

It is noted that after studying English for about nine years, the Iraqi school leavers are, in most cases, incapable of speaking or writing a single flawless sentence in English (Rezaee & Mubarak, 2018; Dhafir, Dehham & Nayif, 2018; Abed, 2011). This raises many questions about the soundness of teachers and the suitability of approaches engaged. Without a doubt, there is the main problem confronting English education in Iraq.

The core problem of the current study is to find out the effect of using L1, namely Arabic, in the teaching processes on Iraqi EFL learners' achievement in language tests. In other words, the current study intends to find out whether using Arabic in the teaching process can be of any positive effect on helping EFL learners in acquiring English as a foreign language. Consequently, the current study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Does the use of Arabic in Iraqi EFL classrooms help to improve Iraqi EFL primary pupils' performance in language tests?
2. Is there any significant difference between the pupils who are taught using Arabic and those who are taught using only English in the post-test scores?

### **The Significance of the Study**

The current study is hoped to be of some help in solving the debate about using Arabic in teaching English. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study would be the first empirical one to be conducted in Iraq, which discusses using Arabic in the primary EFL classrooms. Moreover, it might help the teachers realise the pupils' needs and make some judgments about the more appropriate use of Arabic to facilitate learning.

### ***The Hypotheses***

The following hypotheses are going to be tested throughout the current study:

- 1- The use of Arabic in Iraqi EFL classrooms help to improve Iraqi EFL performance in language tests, i.e. there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores for the pupils in the experimental group unlike those in the control group.
- 2- There is a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of the pupils who are taught using Arabic (the experimental group) and those who are taught using only English (the control group).

### ***The Limitations***

The present study is limited to a sample of 6<sup>th</sup> grade Iraqi pupils in primary school enrolled in two classes in Al-Azhar primary school in Baghdad. They were assigned to two groups: one group (N=30) as the control group, the other group (N=30) as the experimental group. The language elements included in the study are limited to the textbook assigned by the education authority in Iraq, namely "*English for Iraq 6<sup>th</sup> Grade*". The experiment is limited to a nine-weeks teaching period during the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019.

### ***The Procedures***

The following procedures are going to be followed throughout the current study.

1. Selecting a sample from 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils in a primary school, who are then randomly divided into two groups: a control group and an experimental group.
2. Constructing a pre-test and post-test to be exposed to experts to ensure its validity and reliability;
3. Administering a pre-test to the experimental and control groups to assess the pre-intervention level of the pupils' competence in English.
4. Teaching the regular materials to the experimental group by using Arabic as an L1. While for the control group, the same materials were taught using only English and avoiding any use of the L1.
5. Conducting a final administration of the post-test to the pupils of both groups to find out whether the use of L1 has any effect on the pupils' achievement in English.
6. Collecting the required data and analysing it using SPSS programme.

### ***Background of the Study***

Arab states have been teaching English in schools, as it is the language of the colonist who had occupied most of the Arab states for long times. The significance of teaching English in Iraq initiated in 1921 as a result of the British Mandate. As the colonist usually tends to force its language and culture over the colonised, teaching English became importance in Iraq. There are many difficulties concerned with teaching English in Iraq, most of which are

associated with environmental problems and the educational organisation itself (Alwan, 2004).

In the past, English as a foreign language was taught in Iraqi public schools from the fifth to the twelfth grades. Lately and after the war of 2003, teaching English became compulsory, starting from the first year of schooling. Education in Iraq has been negatively affected by the wars that have been pervasive over the last two decades. Limitless children and youth have become separated from formal schooling for reasons such as displacement, being orphan, poverty, degradation of learning facilities, etc.

### ***Reasons for Using L1 in the EFL Classroom***

Several studies have been carried out in different countries to investigate areas in which teachers can take advantage of their 'pupils' first language (Song, 2009; AlNofaie, 2010). The notion of L1 serving as "a time-saving device" is the most frequently given justification by teachers for LI use (Atkinson, 1987, p.422). Similarly, Shimizu (2006) indicates that "time-saving" is one of the principal arguments why researchers are in favour of using LI. While Harbors (1992) argues that "facilitating teacher-student communication" and "facilitating teacher-student rapport" are two primary objectives for the teachers' use of students' L1 in EFL classrooms. Supporting the use of L1 in EFL classes, Auerbach (1993) indicates that achieving a good relationship between students and teachers is a desirable aim that can be fulfilled through L1 use. In Cook's (2001), Shimizu's (2006), Nazary's (2008) and AL-Novae's (2010) studies, the findings revealed that a large number of teachers' favourite choice for giving complex instructions was by using the students' mother tongue. Harbord (1992) emphasises that giving class instructions by using L1 is a critical point to achieve and facilitate communication between teachers and students. Similarly, Cook (2001) supports the opinion that managing the classroom is always fulfilled by using L1 for giving instructions.

### ***Benefits of Using L1***

It has often been stated by EFL teachers and researchers that there are numerous benefits for the use of L1 in EFL classes. For that, most academics and investigators who support this impression trust in its importance, necessity, and its positive impact upon acquiring a new language. So they proposed the following significant benefits of using L1.

- 1- It makes straightforward the duty of clarifying the meaning of abstract words and assists in presenting the central differences in grammar and pronunciation between L1 and L2 (Buck master, 2002; Cole, 1998).
- 2- Using L1 aids communication, teacher-student relations, and the learning of FL (Harbor, 1992).

- 3- It reduces 'pupils' worry and forms a more comforting learning atmosphere (Burden, 2000; Philips, 1993).
- 4- L1 methods enable teachers to use richer and more genuine texts, which mean more understandable input and quicker attainment. Using L1 can save a lot of time and misperception (Harbor, 1992).

### ***Drawbacks of Using L1***

Despite all the advantages of using L1 in EFL classes that are mentioned above, there are still some drawbacks which are listed below.

1. It can form lethargy amongst pupils so that they learn an inadequate sum of English vocabulary: because they attempt to discover the translation of words rather than alternative words (Atkinson, 1987).
2. The exaggeration of the use of L1 leads pupils to think in L1, which hinders the growth of learning English. The overuse or misuse of L1 leads to negative effects on learning English. That is why teachers are ought to be conscious of the sum of L1 used in EFL classes.
3. The use of L1 can produce an over-reliance on it (Polio, 1994, p.153).

### **The Study**

#### ***Procedures and Methods***

It is tough to assemble a true experimental design, mainly in school classroom experimental research. This is because the experimental design is a "blueprint of the formula that aids the scholar to test his hypothesis by incoming at valid conclusions about associations between independent and dependent variables" (Best & Kahn, 2006, p.177). Moreover, experimental design is " a complete sequence of steps taken ahead of time to ensure that the appropriate data will be obtained in a way that permits an objective analysis leading to valid inferences with respect to the stated problem" (Ali Dh. B, 2018). For that, the present study implements one of the quasi-experimental strategies, which is "the pretest-posttest non-equivalent groups".

Two classes in a primary school were randomly selected to carry out the experiment. One group formed the experimental group which was taught by using native language, while the other formed the control group taught using only English avoiding, as much as possible, any use of the mother tongue. Pre- and post-tests were administered to both groups to find out the degree of improvement in the pupils' responses to the test after the experiment.

### ***Population and Sample of the Study***

The study population is the 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils at the primary school in Baghdad during the academic year (2018-2019). Al-Azhar Primary School was selected to be the sample of this study. The number of the pupils was 60 equally divided into two sections: the experimental group (N=30) and the control group N=30. One section was selected randomly to embody the experimental group, and the other section embodies the control one. The test' results of two pupils from the control group were neglected because they did not attend the post-test, so the number of the participants in the control group was 28, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic Features of the Participants

Groups	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Experimental	30	51.7	51.7	51.7
Control	28	48.3	48.3	100.0
Total	58	100.0	100.0	

### ***Research Instrument***

A test is defined as the assessment of the knowledge of an individual in a particular content area, skill or accomplishment in a specific curriculum, time frame, and material. Tests can help in diagnosing the level of students and what they need to work on to develop (Brown, 2007). To achieve the aims of the current study, pre- and post-tests were designed. The pre-test and the post-test were built following the recommendations of the central committee.

The tests were designed in a parallel way. Each consists of five items arranged in the following way.

1. The first item was designed to test the pupils' reading comprehension.
2. The second item was built after testing the participants' knowledge of sentence structure (word order).
3. The third item was focusing on translation.
4. The fourth item was concerned with matching
5. The fifth item was intended to test the pupils' use of pronouns.

### ***The Validity of the Tests***

One of the most vital standards that must be taken into consideration when choosing or building a test is its validity. Validity relates to the degree to which an exam measures what it is supposed to measure. Two forms of validity are regarded as valuable for achievement tests: face and content validity. Face validity means how the test appears to measure what it is

supposed to measure (Coombe, 2010). On the other hand, content validity means how an exam measures sufficiently and adequately the specified skill or activity it is set out to measure (Richards, 2010).

Both forms were addressed to evaluate the test used in the present study. Since the test was based on the materials of the texts: *'students' book* and *activity book*, it has content validity (Dhafir, 2018).

The tests were given to fifteen jury members who are experts in linguistics and TEFL to evaluate the validity of the tests. After administering minor changes to the two tests, they were stated as valid.

### ***Conducting the test***

#### ***The Pre-test Administration***

Pupils of both the experimental and control groups were pre-tested on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2019. This pre-test was administered in order to compare the scores of the 'pupils' achievement in both groups to ensure homogeneity of the sample regarding their pre-intervention test achievement. Another reason for conducting the pre-test is to be able to compare the pre-test scores with those in the post-test.

The pupils have made only minor questions about the test as all its items were clear. The average time the pupils needed to accomplish the test was 45 minutes.

#### ***The Post-test Administration***

Pupils in both groups (the experimental and control ones) were post-tested on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2019. The same pre-test procedures were followed in the administration of the post-test, specifically scoring arrangement, validity, item difficulty, item discrimination, and reliability.

### **The Results**

To answer the two questions raised in the current study, a paired-samples t-test was run for the pre-test and post-test scores for both the experimental and the control groups. It was found that there was an improvement in the scores in post-test for both the experimental and the control groups. Nevertheless, the improvement in the experimental group (means = 23.1 at the pre-test and =30.23 at the post-test) was more than that in the control group (mean=22.14 in the pre-test and mean = 26.6 in the post-test), see Table 2.

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics of the Total Scores of the pre and post-test

Group		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	T1 Total of all questions	30	16	34	23.17	4.504
	T2 Total of all questions	30	14	40	30.23	4.925
	Valid N (listwise)	30				
Control	T1 Total of all questions	28	18	28	22.14	2.978
	T2 Total of all questions	28	22	40	26.68	4.217
	Valid N (listwise)	28				

The results had also shown that the difference between the scores in the pre-test and post-test in the experimental group is statistically significant (Sig. 2-tailed= .012<.05) whereas for the control group the difference is not significant (Sig. 2- tailed -.336>.05). The details are shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3:** Paired Samples T-Test for the Experimental and Control Groups at Pre- and Post-tests

Group	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental	2/205	-1.573	29	.012
Control	2.701	-.979	27	.336

## Discussion and Conclusion

The scores of the pupils in the experimental group who were taught using the Arabic language were higher than the scores the pupils of the control group, who were taught using only English. Accordingly, the results of the study prove the two hypotheses of the study. This goes in line with many studies that established the dominance of the use of L1 in EFL classrooms, such as Xhemaili (2017), Iqbal (2016), and Alja'arat and Hasan (2017).

Consequently, the conclusion reached is that a controlled and well-organised use of L1 in EFL classrooms can help to improve the EFL learners' acquisition and can also fasten the learning process. It helps learners to be able to better perform in the EFL tests on different aspects such as reading comprehension. It also helps to increase their knowledge of sentence structures and translation.

## REFERENCES

- Abed, A. Q. (2011). Teachers' awareness of second language learning strategies adopted and used by their students: A questionnaire. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. 1(3), 205-218.
- Ali, Dh. B, Dehham S. H. & Hasan A. A. (2019). The effect of using index cards games technique on Iraqi EFL intermediate students' performance on writing skill. *Indian Journal of Public Health Research & Development*. 10 (1), NA
- Alja'arat, S. M. & Hasan, S. H. The influence of mother tongue on learning English language by Arab learners. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 7(8). 31- 37. Retrieved on 2<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 2018 from : <http://www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-0817/ijsrp-p6806.pdf>
- Alwan, A. A. (2004). *Education in Iraq, current situation and new perspective: A report on the situation today and our strategies for the immediate future*.
- Atkinson, D. (1987). The mother tongue in the classroom a neglected resource? *ELT Journal*, 44(4), 241-247.
- Brown, D.H. (2007). *First language acquisition: Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). New York: Pearson ESL.
- Burden, P. (2000). The use of the students' mother tongue in monolingual English. "conversation" classes at Japanese universities, *The Language Teacher Online*, 24(6). Retrieved on April 15, 2011 from <http://www.jaltpublication.org/tilt/articles>
- Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue Canadienne des Langues Vivantes*, 57(3), 402-23.
- Dhafir, M. R., Dehham, S.H. & Nayif, A. A. (2018). The impact of reciprocal listening activity on fifth preparatory students' listening comprehension. *India Journal of public Health Research and Development*, 4(1), 89-95.
- Iqbal, Y. (2016). The influence of mother tongue on learning a foreign language in the kingdom of Bahrain. *European Journal of English Language, Linguistics and Literature*. 3(2). 44-51. Retrieved on Dec. 15 from: <https://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Full-Paper-THE-INFLUENCE-OF-MOTHER-TONGUE-ON-LEARNING-A-FOREIGN-LANGUAGE-IN-THE-KINGDOM-OF-BAHRAIN.pdf>



Rezaee, A.A. & Mubarak, A. (2018). EFL learners' proficiency level of critical thinking: The case of Iraqi university students. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 12(3), 91-108.

Xhemaili, M. (2017). The influence of mother tongue (Albanian) in learning and teaching EFL. *Thesis*. 6(2), 3-21.