

Exploring Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on the Use of the Mother Tongue as a Mediational Tool in a Saudi EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This study reports the findings of a qualitative study of non-native English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' beliefs about the role of the first language (L1) as a mediating tool in a Saudi EFL classroom at a university level. As such, this research was conducted with the aim of answering the main research question which seeks a better understanding and deeper insights into the beliefs that directly affect the teachers' use of the L1 in the classroom as a mediational tool. The sample consisted of twenty (twelve male and eight female) EFL teachers who answered an open-ended question in an online survey. Four teachers (two male and two female) participated voluntarily in semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the data produced several themes. Those findings revealed that despite all the literature acknowledging the benefits of using the mother tongue in the classroom, many English Language Institute (ELI) teachers still believe in limiting its use as a mediational tool in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom as much as possible. In addition, it appeared that the lower the level of students' English proficiency, the more the teacher is likely to use L1 in the classroom. These findings have implications for classroom practice and could be employed to emphasise the value of teachers' beliefs about the role of L1 as a mediational tool in the ELT classroom.

Keywords: First language (L1), EFL, mother tongue (MT), mediational tool, Saudi context

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1. Introduction

The aims of the current study are threefold: exploring teachers' beliefs about the use of L1 as a mediational tool in the EFL classroom; explaining teachers' practices with a particular emphasis on their use of L1 in the classroom and finally, delving deep into the reasons behind those beliefs and practices.

2. Literature Review

The pertinent literature on sociocultural theory and language as a mediational tool will be presented. Additionally, some light will be shed on the history of L1 in the EFL classroom supported by some research studies that advocate the role played by in the EFL classroom as well as some arguments against its use.

2.1 Sociocultural Theory and L1 as a Mediational Tool

This study is informed by the sociocultural theory; therefore, reviewing the pertinent literature on the sociocultural theory and mediation showing how language and L1 are interrelated is important. Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2015) believe that the sociocultural theory is a solid basis to research and explain the use of strategies in English language teaching. They added that mediation is an important variable in the development of strategic learning. However, Izadi, Khoshsima, Nourmohammadi, and Yarahmadzahi (2017) stress that this is regulated and controlled only by developed learners who mastered this control of their first language through their culture and being part of their society. Masuda and Arnett (2015) further clarify that sociocultural theory views speaking and thinking to be in a "dialectal relationship" where speaking acts as an outcome of initiated thoughts. This suggests that L2 learners are mostly thinking in L1 and producing the outcome in second language (L2). This denotes that controlling and mediating L2, learners should have mastered L1. This is also supported by other researchers who indicated that only adult learners who have mastered their L1 are capable of using L1 to better understand L2 (Artemeva & Myles, 2015; Nakatsukasa & Loewen, 2015). Therefore, if the learner is not completely competent in his/her L1, this might suggest that using L1 will not affect his/her L2 learning. In harmony with this, Marsden, Mitchell, and Myles (2013) explain that the social interaction that takes place in the target language is not only a source of input for the learner, but it has its central and important role in learning as well. Another important aspect of sociocultural theory related to this study is the notion of accumulating shared knowledge within a joint activity where new understanding takes place by the use of mediational tools (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; K. E. Johnson & Golombek, 2016). This accumulation of shared knowledge takes place when the learners interact with others allowing this learning to be transferred across "minds, persons, and the symbolic and physical environments, both natural and artificial" (Pea, 1993, p. 47).

Recent research has been in favor of the utilization of L1 in the ELT classroom instead of total abandonment. Researchers believe that the role of L1 in L2 learning is language transfer (L. Jin & Cortazzi, 2018; Lin, 2015; Miri, Alibakhshi, & Mostafaei-Alaei, 2017). In other words, L1 is viewed as a positive source of cross linguistic influence, but still many researchers and teachers choose to avoid the use of L1 as much as possible (Nation, 2003). This disagreement gives room for Vygotsky's (1978) understanding of language as a cognitive tool and according to Lantolf, Thorne, and Poehner (2015), any language has a

mediational function that serves as a higher function in human's mental life. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory states that learners use language to communicate with their more capable peers which helps in the social development of their higher mental functioning and thinking.

Mediation, be it physical or symbolic, is understood as "the introduction of an auxiliary device into an activity that then links humans to the world of objects or to the world of mental behaviour" (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994, p. 418). In this study, this device is L1, as it allows the learner to organise, alter and control his/her mental abilities and learning of L2.

2.3 Controversies over the Use of L1 in the L2 Classroom

Researchers supporting the use of L2 in the EFL classroom argue that if teachers are allowed to use students' L1, this will hinder their students' learning of the target language. The literature provides many justifications for this belief which mainly evolve around the following three claims: First, learning L2 is like learning L1; hence the need for maximizing the learner's exposure to L2 (Krashen's theory). Second, success in L2 learning requires a clear distinction and separation between L1 and L2. Finally, the continuous use of L2 will help learners recognize its importance (Tavares, 2015).

With regards to the first point, it is argued that maximizing students' exposure to L2 is one of the important factors in its learning (Brandeker & Thordardottir, 2017; Sung, 2016). This is compared to the learner's acquisition of a first language; thereby, listening and copying the language they hear, and this exposure also helps the learners' continuous language development. In reference to the second point, it is supported by Patek (2003) who claims that translating L1 into L2 can have detrimental effects on the learners as assuming that every meaning in L2 has an equivalent in L1 is not always the case. The third claim stresses that the exclusive use of L2 in the classroom will make students recognize its importance. In advocacy of this, C. G. Polio and Duff (1994) argue that using L1 in the English classroom is against second language acquisition theories, where "negotiation of meaning in L2" and "modified input in L2" are importantly encouraged and proven to be successful. However, other researchers argue against this saying that learning could also be accomplished by a mixture of L1 and L2 (Airey, 2017). He explains that this is more beneficial for the learner and could happen either between the learners themselves or between the learner and their L2 teacher. Finally, some researchers admit that ELT teachers know and acknowledge importance of teaching in L2, but still do use L1 on specific occasions in classroom (Duff and Polio, 1990; Polio & Duff 1994; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002; Edstrom, 2006). In the same vein, Martinez & Olivera (2003) argue that a right balance of L1 and L2 use is recommended taking into account learners' needs, age and level. They add that learners should not try to be native-like, but they should aim to be successful bilinguals.

As can be seen, supporters of using L2 in the classroom argue that the learners need to be exposed as much as possible to L2, but while many writers agree that exposure to the target language is critical to acquire the language, some writers see it otherwise. For example, Shahnaz (2016), believes that most students' input in an English-only classroom is

not comprehensible. According to the literature, there is no solid evidence maximising the L2 exposure will benefit learners (Cook, 2016).

2.4 Teachers' Beliefs

With reference to teachers' beliefs, researchers seem to view them differently in the literature. However, they all agree on a general view where beliefs are regarded as a mental state that can be held consciously or unconsciously (Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016). They also agree that beliefs play an important role in informing teacher's practices (K. M. Scott, 2016; Zohar & Alboher Agmon, 2018). J.C. Richards and Schmidt (2013) define teachers' beliefs as "ideas and theories that teachers hold about themselves, teaching, language, learning and their students" (p.586). Studying these ideas will allow educators to try to understand the effects they have on teachers' practices. In this sense, teachers' beliefs play a crucial role in determining if teachers will use L1 and how they will use it. For example, two research studies pinpointed that the majority of teachers believe in the maximization of L2 use in the classroom (Bruhlmann, 2012). By holding such beliefs, teachers are going to consciously or unconsciously try to reflect that into their practice and limit the use of L1 as much as possible. While in another study done by Goodwin, August, and Calderon (2015) found that L1 is altering the interaction between the learner and L2; therefore, teachers could select to use it as a tool for L2 teaching.

3. Methodology & Research Design

This paper is based on the interpretive research paradigm, where teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to their use of L1 in L2 classrooms are explored.

The methodology of the current study is of an exploratory nature. This provides insights into Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs and practices about the role of L1 as a mediational tool in their L2 classrooms. This research used open-ended questions as well as semi-structured interviews.

3.1 Research Questions

This study attempted to address the following research questions:

1. What are the Saudi EFL teachers' beliefs regarding the use of L1 in the EFL classroom as a mediational tool?
2. What are Saudi EFL teachers' current practices regarding their use of L1 as a mediational tool in the EFL classroom?
3. What reasons do participants offer for their beliefs and practices with regards to L1 use in the classroom?

3.2 Research Participants

Participants of the current study consisted of 20 Saudi EFL teachers working at the ELI (12 male and 8 female) who answered an open-ended online survey. As it is a small-scale study, four teachers (2 male and 2 female) who participated voluntarily in a semi-structured interview out of the ten participants who were willing to be interviewed, were selected. I used purposive sampling which according to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), is one kind of "non-probability sampling" where the researcher chooses the sample based on specific

criteria to meet the purpose of the study. The sample was selected based on both purposiveness and availability (Daniel, 2011). All participants were Saudi EFL teachers who taught the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at the ELI, and Arabic was their first language.

3.3 Data Collection

Two of the interviews were face-to-face and the remaining two were over the telephone for cultural and religious reasons as female teachers cannot work in a male-inhabited campus. All four interviews were in English, recorded digitally and lasted for around 30 minutes each. After the interviews were saved securely, they were transcribed and then all the participants were e-mailed a copy of the transcription in order to validate what has been said in the interviews. The researcher requested the participants to correct, add or delete any part of the transcription which they do not think that they have said.

4. Data Analysis & Results

Both, the interviews and questionnaires produced a vast amount of data. The following Table (1), shows the themes used in the data analysis.

Table 1. *Data Analysis Themes*

Data Analysis Themes		
1. Teachers' Beliefs Regarding L1 Use	2. Teachers' Current Practices Regarding L1 Use	3. Sources of Teachers' Beliefs Regarding L1 Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative attitudes • Obligation to use it • Limited use as a tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' low proficiency level • Time saver • To facilitate teaching when students do not understand • Language skill areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Grammar ○ Vocabulary • For group work and task-based instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher training • Teachers' personal knowledge and experience • Higher ELI administrative issues/instructions

As shown in Table 1, three categories drawn from the research questions were created and applied to the data from the interviews and the open-ended survey responses. The first category applied to the data was 'Teachers' Attitudes & Beliefs Regarding L1 Use' eliciting

how they thought about the L1 in the classroom and their attitudes towards its possible uses. The second category was 'Teachers' Current Practices Regarding L1 Use', which looked for reasons for when and why they use L1 in the classroom. The third and final category looked at the 'Sources of Teachers' Beliefs Regarding L1 Use' as a mediational tool in the EFL classroom. Those three pre-determined categories allowed themes to emerge as evident from the table presented above.

4.1 Teachers' Beliefs about L1 Use

The data analysis process revealed that teachers tend to first try to explain in English once or twice and when they fail, they would consider the use of L1 as a tool that enables them to reach low level students and help them understand. However, their statements clearly present the teachers' resentment to using L1 as a mediating tool for learning vocabulary for example. They used expressions like “understandable”, “bad need” and “when there is no way to...” indicating that they believe they should be using L2 only to explain vocabulary, but as they have no other choice, they are using L1 as the last resort. Analysis of the data revealed that the overall responses of the participants indicated that they had a sense of negative belief towards their students speaking in L1 during group work and pair work in classroom. The following extracts revealed a tone of dissatisfaction with their students' behaviour thus:

“I tell them [students] not to speak in Arabic... Although I know that they will speak in Arabic ... But I will not be very strict in that area... I will tell them that you know... Just try and speak in English as it is better for you” (T2).

When asked about group work and pair work, one teacher said:

“I remember trying that [asking them to speak only in English] for a long time but no one would listen, and they would end up speaking in Arabic anyway... Therefore, nowadays I do not insist that they speak in English” (T3).

The above examples reflect that although the ELI teachers allow students to use L1 in classroom to mediate their learning, they are not happy about that, indicating that they do not believe that L1 will assist them in learning L2 and that they allow it because students do it anyway.

4.2 Teachers' Current Practices Regarding L1 Use

4.2.1. Using L1 with Low Level Students

The most recurring theme that appeared in the first category was that teachers do not choose, but they are rather forced to use Arabic with low level students. This was evident from both the interviews and open-ended surveys. According to the data, the amount of L1 used as a mediational tool would differ according to students' level in English. The lower the level of students is, the more L1 is used in the EFL classroom. The following quotes demonstrate this finding:

“I will first say it in English once or twice, if I feel they didn't get it, I might at the end deliver [the intended point] in Arabic... If their level [in English] is very low” (T1).

“The lower level they are, the more Arabic I am forced to use in classroom”
(T3).

This denotes that teachers resort to Arabic due to students' poor proficiency level in English. In other words, there is a correlation between the use of Arabic in the EFL classroom and students' low proficiency level.

4.2.2. Using L1 as a Time-Saver

Teachers' use of L1 in the classroom in order to save time has been repeated in many of the teachers' interviews and questionnaires. For example, T1 states that if his students are struggling to understand a simple issue in English for more than 3-5 minutes, he would then:

“Use Arabic to save time and facilitate the learning” (T1 states).

This was supported by the responses written by teachers in the open-ended questionnaire:

“Using the mother tongue may save us precious time” (TQ7).

The data revealed that majority of the participants indicated that one of the factors behind the teachers' use of L1 is not having enough time in the classroom.

4.2.3. Using the L1 to Maintain Students' Attention

Within the second category, many of the teachers stated that using L1 sometimes is the only way for them to get their students attention when they are absent-minded or disoriented in class. For example, one teacher commented on this issue thus:

“When students are absent-minded and wonder where we stopped? What's happening? ... this is a situation I feel obliged to use it [L1]” (T2).

Similarly, another teacher gave another reason for using Arabic in the EFL classroom as follows:

“They do make me speak Arabic... Because sometimes I feel if I use Arabic... They will get this... While if I keep teaching in English, we will get nowhere” (T4).

On this occasion, teachers use L1 to get students back on track in the classroom if they feel they are not getting what is being explained.

4.2.4. Using L1 for New Vocabulary and Grammar

Teachers mentioned many reasons and conditions that make them use L1 in their classrooms, three of which were repeated more than the others. All of the teachers mentioned that when it comes to vocabulary, they all feel the need to use L1 while explaining the new vocabulary. An example of this is represented in the words of the following teachers:

“The resort to the MT can be understandable in very limited situations... mostly as a concept checking strategy; namely, the teaching of vocabulary” (TQ6).

“I use L1 if there is a bad need for a certain word” (TQ9).

“I use mostly English but when there is no way to explain the new vocabulary, after giving examples, putting the new word in sentences, giving synonyms, antonyms, I tend to use Arabic as the last resort” (TQ8).

Data also revealed that the second most common reason teachers gave for the use of L1 in the classroom was to help teach grammar rules. The following extracts clarify this:

“Sometimes, it is easier for students to grasp an idea once it is compared to a previously mastered concept in MT such as the order of adjective and nouns in English which is reversed in Arabic” (TQ5).

“For example, the present perfect is very difficult to explain just in English... And grammar is an abstract thing... There are some similarities and some differences with the Arabic language... So I think grammar is one of the main areas when I use Arabic in teaching... In order to facilitate and explain... The rules for the students to make it easier for them to understand...” (T1).

Other participants also held similar attitudes towards using L1 and teaching English grammar. However, T2 was completely against the use of L1 in teaching grammar as he commented thus:

“Never ... never ... especially in grammar... Because even in teaching grammar, I wouldn't use the Arabic language ... But I'll try my best to endorse English... Because language is not only for communication, but it is also for students to try and understand in English. It is better for them ... so that's why” (T2).

T2 continues to clarify that if he simply translates into L1 for students, they will “get lazy” and would not listen to his explanation in English and just wait for the Arabic version. However, it should be noted that by doing this, T2 is running the risk of students especially the low-level ones of not understanding at all.

4.3 Source(s) of Teachers' Beliefs Regarding L1 Use

The third and final pre-determined category applied to the data was the sources of teachers' beliefs regarding the use of L1 as a mediational tool. Within this theme, the following three sub-themes emerged: teacher's training as English language teachers, teachers' personal knowledge and experience, and finally higher ELI administrative issues. In response to the question: 'Where do you think your beliefs on the use of L1 in the classroom came from?' T2 responded by saying:

“When we were being trained to become English language teachers, I remember the instructors told us how important it was to only speak English to the students ... Because after all this is an English language classroom” (T2).

Interestingly, T1 had a completely different experience in his training as an English language teacher:

“However when I did my MA degree ... I read some articles and we talked about the use of L1 ... And my lecturer and the articles both drew my attention to noticing that the mother tongue should not be avoided in the classroom” (T1).

However, T3 answered by saying:

“I think it is mainly education. I have grown up with the idea that if you use Arabic in the classroom, then this is negative or not good” (T3).

Although both T1 and T3 obtained their degrees from the United Kingdom, they have different experiences with regard to using L1 in the classroom. T1, T2 and T4 all agree that when they were trained, L1 was to be avoided and the whole classroom should be taught in L2, while this did not seem to be the case for T3. The second emerging theme was related to teachers' use of their personal experiences as L2 learners. The data showed that three of the teachers acknowledged that they are reluctant to use L1 because when they were students, their best L2 teachers did not speak any Arabic at all in the classroom. The following extracts will clarify this point:

“For me it's something we grew up with since we were at school; the good teacher was the one that didn't use any Arabic even at school” (T3).

“When I was a learner, I used to look down on the teachers who use Arabic language most of the time” (T2).

The above quotes highlight that teachers' beliefs have been greatly influenced by their own experiences as second language learners. T2 even admits having a lack of respect towards his teachers who used L1 in the classroom, which indicates how strongly he believes in the total abandonment of L1 in the classroom. This leads us to conclude that among the non-native English language teachers in the ELI, there is this notion that using L1 in the classroom is something negative and should be avoided. Most teachers admit that they have to use it whether according to the different situations in which they find themselves or as required by their students. The third emerging theme in this category indicated that the administration in the ELI interferes in teachers' practices inside the classroom by discouraging L1's use. The following extracts pinpoint this view:

“[the ELI administration] is against the use of L1 in the classroom” and that I heard a verbal threat from one of the higher officials [administrative staff he didn't want to name him or his position] in the institute that “if you use Arabic you might have to think about leaving the institution” (T1).

T3 also confirmed this interference by stating that teachers were instructed:

“to try to only use strictly English as much as possible”.

However, T2 had a slightly different attitude where he added that even if the institution did not openly discourage L1 use, he felt it was his responsibility to maximize the use of L2 in the classroom. He illustrated his view thus:

“The teacher knows what's best for his students and what's best for them is that he uses English all the time, and only allows Arabic when there is no other way to make the

students understand' (T2).

5. Discussion of Findings

Analysis of the open-ended questionnaire data revealed that the overall responses of the participants indicated they had a sense of negative attitude towards their students speaking in L1, especially during group work and pair work in the classroom. Although the research found that allowing students to use L1 in the classroom to mediate their learning, they are not happy about that indicating that they do not believe that L1 will actually assist the students in learning L2. On the other hand, research has proven that L1 plays an important role as a mediational tool especially in collaborative activities among learners (Machaal; Song & Samimy, 2015; Z. Wang, 2017).

The argument presented here is that teachers' awareness of the ELI needs to be raised to include the beneficial factors of L1 use as a mediational tool in the EFL classroom. In addition, all four interviewed teachers also showed negative attitudes towards their use of L1 in the English language classroom, although they were aware of its useful role in their classes. The participants in the surveys also mention further words of caution against L1 use. Therefore, this paper argues that teachers find it difficult to control the use of Arabic. Similarly, Atkinson (1993) integrates communicative methodology with selective and limited use of L1 and notes that "It is impossible to talk of a 'right balance' or a perfect model for using L1—it's not that simple. L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and inappropriate ways" (p.2). Thus, a balanced approach is needed which regards the role of L1 as a mediational tool, but also recognizes the importance of maximizing L2 use in the classroom. Similarly, results of questionnaires reveal that the majority of teachers think that Arabic is sometimes necessary to explain complex grammar points, to define new vocabulary items, and to change the atmosphere of the class. This reflects what Tavares (2015) elaborates on the situations in which MT is necessary to be used. The data further suggests that the lower the students are, the more L1 teachers are forced to use. This notion of using L1 more with low level students is in line with Pea (1993) and (Wilson, 2016) studies whose results showed that using L1 was one of the significant factors used by teachers with lower level students. It could be argued that exposing low level learners to a vast amount of L2 in order to understand a simple point is not the best approach. The literature revealed that this approach was rejected by Burden (2000) and Cianflone (2009) as they state that the quantity of the exposure to L2 is not as important as the quality of the text materials, the training of teachers and the methodology adopted in teaching. Burden (2000) also states that "increasing the amount of L2 instead of perhaps a simple explanation in the L1 is likely to have a negative effect and simply adds to students' frustration" (p.6). As evident in the data, most participants try as much as possible to avoid using L1 as a mediating tool with low level students, which is also what the administration in the institute encourages. It is suggested that this view of L1 as the last resort needs to be changed and teachers need to be encouraged to resort to L1 when needed especially with low level students. This paper is not advocating that teachers should immediately start explaining in L1, but rather it suggests they acknowledge the fact that L1 could be a valuable tool here if used appropriately whenever and wherever needed. According to the literature, resorting to L1 is a natural phenomenon and should not be avoided (Atkinson, 1987; Harbord, 1992; Nation, 2003). The previous finding also seems to be consistent with

Yildiz and Yesilyurt (2017) findings, which suggests that the use of L1 could save time and allow for more time for practicing L2 in the classroom as students' understanding is more rapidly achieved. Although this is not an exclusive or comprehensive solution to the problem of not having enough time to cover the whole syllabus, it could slightly contribute to solving the problem. Using L1 to ensure getting students' maximum attention is also supported by Nakatsukasa and Loewen (2015) who found that after careful observation of ESL classes, teachers tend to use L1 when they need to maintain students' attention and guarantee they are not drifting away.

However, it could be argued that other methods are more effective in maintaining students' attention. For example, Dörnyei (1994) argues that the teacher needs to introduce "unexpected, novel, unfamiliar, and even paradoxical events; not allowing lessons to settle into too regular a routine; periodically breaking the static character of the classes by changing the interaction pattern and the seating formation and by making students get up and move from time to time" (p.281). This paper argues that in the ELI, the use of L1 to maintain students' attention is not sufficient on its own to achieve that goal. However, teachers need to be introduced to additional different techniques, such as the ones offered by Dörnyei (1994) to help keep students fully motivated and engaged in the classroom. This could be introduced for teachers in professional development courses and workshops provided by the ELI for its staff. This implies that if the teacher willingly uses L1 for vocabulary learning, it is likely to teach students better than if the teacher was forced to use it or was using it as the last resort without believing in its effectiveness as a called-for mediation and vocabulary understanding. In order to do this, teachers in the ELI need to expand their awareness of L1 and its use in the classroom (Lin, 2015).

This change is in line with Al-Hadhrami and Region (2008) and Al-Shidhani and Region (2009) whose research findings indicated that Saudi EFL teachers and students believe in the effectiveness of L1 use in the English classroom for teaching and explaining vocabulary. Moreover, the notion of explaining difficult points in grammar using L1 is also supported by Duff and Polio (1990) who conducted a study to investigate the amount of L2 used in the foreign language classroom. In their study, 13 teachers were interviewed after being observed in their classrooms. Their study revealed that the majority of teachers favoured using L1 for many reasons including explaining grammar. Atkinson (1987) also supports the use of L1 to teach grammar and states that it is the preferred strategy for most L2 learners. With regards to sources of teachers' beliefs about L1 and its use in the EFL classroom, it could be argued that in the ELI, this is one of the contributing factors why teachers try to avoid the use of L1 as much as possible mainly because of this is how they were trained as English language teachers. It should be noted that Freeman (1989) argues that teacher training programmes sometimes can fall into the trap of having a "fragmented view" on teaching (p.40). For example, in the training of teachers T1, T2 and T4, it could be assumed that the training programme they undertook adopted Krashen (1982's) view of language learning in that the more comprehensible exposure learners get to L2, the better learners they will become. While the exposure to different materials and literature where L1 was not considered a threat to L2 classroom during his degree in the UK made T1 different in this respect (Macaro, 2005). Therefore, it could be argued that enriching the teacher training

programmes in Saudi Arabia with research results and available data on the benefits of L1 in the classroom will lead to a better understanding of the role played by L1 in the classroom. This could also be implemented in the teacher continuous professional development programmes in the ELI.

The final finding indicated that teachers' role in deciding how to use L1 in the classroom is marginalized, which gives a good example of a typical top-down approach in the context of the study. Adopting this approach indicates that the teachers may not have a strong saying in deciding whether they need to use L1 or not. As a result, this will lead to some negative effects on the teachers' practices in the classroom. For example, some of the students' needs cannot be identified by the administration and as discussed earlier low-level students need to be taught sometimes by using L1. This typically indicates what Crandall (2000) warns about institutions falling into the trap of regarding teachers as passive recipients of transmitted knowledge instead of active participants in the construction of meaning. This paper argues that the teacher needs to be involved as a primary source for what tools should be included in the classroom and what should not (K. E. Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Rymes, 2015). This shift to a sociocultural perspective view of learning in the classroom will help in making use of all the mediational tools available including the use of L1.

6. Conclusion

This present study is in favour of mediated learning and argues that L1 can be a useful tool for students with a low proficiency level in communicating with and learning from their non-native teachers in an EFL setting. This type of interaction between the learner and the teacher creates an opportunity for building new knowledge. Therefore, the use of L1 serves as a mediating tool helping the learners to better understand L2. This means that language in general and L1 in specific is most likely to be a mediational tool in the classroom in all forms of higher thinking in the human brain.

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Dr. Mazin Mansory joined the English Language Institution (formerly the *ELC*) at King Abdulaziz University in 2008 after receiving his MA degree in English Language Teaching from Nottingham Trent University, UK. In the ELC, he contributed to the teaching and development of the *General English* and *English for Science* programmes. As part of his Doctorate thesis at Exeter University, completed in October 2016, he carried out research on teachers' roles in English Language Assessment, which remains a focal point of his research interests. Mazin is now an Assistant Professor teaching in the MA in TESOL programme in addition to being the Head of Academic Students' Affairs Unit at the ELI.

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