

# The Use Of Mother Tongue In Saudi EFL Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the usage of the mother tongue in Saudi EFL classrooms and when to use it in the classroom. The study was conducted in the second semester of the 2021–2022 academic year. One hundred (100) English language teachers from Hail secondary schools participated in the study through a questionnaire method. The findings revealed that teachers do not oppose using the mother tongue in language classrooms. Most of them thought the mother tongue should be used in necessary and appropriate situations. Moreover, the mother tongue is a mediating part of language teaching and learning when it is used effectively in the right situations at the right time.

**Keywords:** Mother Tongue, EFL Classrooms, English Language Teachers

## Introduction

### Background

The use of the mother tongue in teaching a foreign language is an inevitable part of various contexts when both the teachers and learners speak the same language. Many scholars who have supported some teaching methods, such as the direct method and the audio-lingual method, strictly prohibit using the mother tongue in EFL classrooms. It is allowed in various methods and approaches such as the Natural Approach Method, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Learning, etc. Larsen-Freeman (2000, 101) claims that “the native language of the students is used in the classroom to enhance the security of the students, to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and to make the meanings of the target language words clear (Larsen-Freeman (2000, 101).

### Statement of the Problem

The use of the mother tongue in a foreign language classroom seems to be an endlessly debatable issue in the field of language learning. The main problem of this study is that many English language teachers may use the mother tongue in various situations for different purposes in Saudi EFL classrooms. In addition, other teachers are uneasy about the use of the mother tongue in the classes and cannot decide whether it is a good idea to use it or not, or if it is going to be used, when, why, and for what purposes. Therefore, this study will answer the following questions:

- When can mother tongue be employed in Saudi EFL classrooms?
- What are the purposes of using mother tongue in EFL classrooms?

### Significance of the Study

The significance of the study comes from the fact that it has explored the perceptions of the teachers towards the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms and explained the main reasons for the use of Arabic while teaching English in Saudi Arabia. The results of this study are useful for most of the teachers who are not able to decide on which language to employ in their English language classrooms. Furthermore, the study uses a different approach to the problem where the teachers' language in the classroom is quantified.

## Literature Review

This chapter is concerned with the discussion about the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms. In addition, the literature review that is available on the topic will be included, to provide the reader with real insights into this crucial topic. Also, the previous studies will be surveyed and compared to the present study.

### Definition of Mother Tongue

Mother tongue language or first language, native tongue, native language, or mother/father/speaking language, is a language or dialect that a person is exposed to from birth or within a long period. The term mother tongue, in many places, may refer to the language or dialect of one's tribe or ethnic rather than one's first language.

The first language of a child is part of that child's personal, social and cultural identity. Researchers suggest that a speaker who is learning a second language may develop fluency in it after about two years of immersion, while, it may only take between five and seven years for that child to be on the same working level as their native-speaking counterparts (Atkinson, 1987).

### Mother Tongue in EFL Classrooms

Most language teachers have investigated the use of the mother tongue in language classes and questioned whether they have to use the student's native language when teaching a foreign language. As stated by Sharma (2006: 80), "the issue of whether language teachers should use the student's first language in their second or foreign language classroom has always been a controversial one.". Some researchers believe that language teachers must insist on using the target language in EFL classrooms and avoid using learners' mother tongue language, to force them to use the target language. This idea is supported by Auerbach (1993: 5) who states, "The more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it to begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it".

On the other hand, many researchers believe that using only the English language in EFL classrooms may cause some problems. Harbord (1992) notices that the teachers who try to use only the English language in EFL classrooms face some problems, and meaningful communication in their classroom is ineffective because many students find it difficult to use the foreign language. In addition, if the teachers avoid using their mother tongue language in EFL classrooms, this may cause a harmful factor to student-teacher interaction. Butzkamm (2003: 29) expressed that "the mother tongue is generally regarded as being an evasive manoeuvre which is to be used only in emergencies."

### Purposes for Using Mother Tongue in EFL Classrooms

In his article, Atkinson (1987: 242), states that "another important role of the mother tongue is to allow students to say what want to say sometimes (surely a valuable 'humanistic' element in the classroom)". The purpose of using the student's mother tongue is to motivate the students to express themselves more efficiently. Especially, for those who lack the vocabulary of the target language. Therefore, teachers have to try to encourage these students to articulate their opinions in their mother tongue when students show difficulty doing so in the target language.

Auerbach (1993: 9), listed the reasons of using mother tongue as:

1. Negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson.
2. Record keeping.
3. Classroom management.
4. Scene setting.
5. Language analysis.
6. Presentation of rules governing grammar.
7. Phonology, morphology and spelling.
8. Discussion of cross- cultural issues; instructions of prompts.
9. Explanation of errors.
10. Assessment of comprehension.

Besides, Harbord (1992: 352) gave the following reasons for the teachers' use of the mother tongue:

1. Facilitating teacher-student communication.
2. Facilitating teacher-student rapport.
3. Facilitating learning.

### Related Studies

The issue of including or excluding the use of the mother tongue in the EFL classroom has been the subject of ongoing discussion and controversy for a long time. Some studies agree that the mother tongue should not be used in EFL classrooms, others think that it makes a valuable contribution to the learning process. Few research have been conducted on the use of Arabic language in EFL classrooms.

The first study was done by Marzook M. Alshammari (2011). The main objective of this study was to examine the purpose of L1 use and the attitudes of Saudi teachers and students towards the role of the Arabic language in the EFL classroom. The results have indicated that the use of Arabic (L1) was for clarification purposes and

that a balanced and judicious use of L1 in the EFL classroom by both teachers and students can be useful in the language learning process and may even be essential to increase learners' comprehension.

The second study was carried out by Khulud Ali Tubayqi and Mazeegha Ahmed Al Tale' (2021). This study aims to highlight the attitudes of both students and teachers towards mother tongue use in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, the justifications for its use, and some of the actual interaction practices in grammar classes. The results indicated that, although both students and teachers generally have positive attitudes toward using the mother tongue in EFL classes, they are also aware of the adverse effects of its overuse. In addition, the teachers and students use their mother tongue in EFL classes to serve different classroom functions that ease the teaching and learning processes.

The third study was conducted by Fatimah Salamah Al-balawi (2016). This study aims to investigate the attitudes of Saudi EFL teachers towards using their mother tongue (L1) in English classrooms amongst female students at secondary schools in Tabuk City. The findings showed that there are positive teachers' attitudes towards using Arabic in EFL classes. The EFL teachers in the study preferred the use of their mother tongue for various situations and reasons and under certain circumstances. The mother tongue can be used by the teachers to facilitate the teaching process as well as a pedagogical tool to enhance the learning experience in the classroom.

### Methodology

This is the practical part of the study assigned to discuss the procedures followed to conduct the study. Sampling, tools of data collection and tools for data analysis will be discussed in detail.

#### Study Design

This research has followed descriptive-analytical methods by giving secondary school teachers a questionnaire that contains ten statements to extract the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms. Then, the results of the questionnaire were analysed in statistical form and presented in both tables and charts. The participants are one hundred (100) English language teachers at secondary schools in Hail.

#### Data Collection

The data of this study was collected by distributing a questionnaire to the chosen population to find answers to the research questions. The questionnaire contained ten multiple choices questions that were designed to know secondary schools' teachers' opinions about the use of the mother tongue in Saudi EFL classrooms.

#### Data Analysis

The tool for analyzing data in this study will be Microsoft Excel and SPSS using percentage and mean. A Likert scale was chosen, and the questionnaire was designed on a scale of three options; agree, to some extent and disagree. There are ten (10) statements in the questionnaire designed according to the following domains:

**Domain (1):** included the first five (5) statements which are concerned the first question "When can mother tongue be employed in Saudi EFL classrooms?"

**Domain (2):** included the last five (5) statements which concerned the second question "What are the purposes of using mother tongue in EFL classrooms?"

### Results and Discussion

The data of this study was collected using a questionnaire which reflected the opinion of secondary school teachers who teach the English language at government schools in Hail toward the use of the mother tongue in Saudi EFL classrooms. The number of the samples was one hundred (100) participants. Table (4.1) below presents their responses to the statements of the questionnaire.

**Table (4.1) Presents the responses to the statements of the questionnaire**

Statement	Agree	To some extent	Disagree
I believe that mother tongue is sometimes used in EFL classroom.	73 73%	19 19%	8 8%
I use mother tongue to explain grammar concepts.	75 75%	17 17%	8 8%
I use mother tongue to explain the meaning of new vocabulary.	77 77%	16 16%	7 7%
I use mother tongue to explain to the students how to do an activity.	75 75%	15 15%	10 10%
I use mother tongue to facilitates understanding English language structure.	78 78%	16 16%	6 6%
In pair and group works, students often need to use their mother tongue to talk about the tasks.	80 80%	15 15%	5 5%

The use of mother tongue can help in accessing the English language input and thereby enhance learning.	73	18	9
	73%	18%	9%
The use of mother tongue may reduce students' anxiety and creates a more relaxing learning atmosphere.	82	12	6
	82%	12%	6%
The use of mother tongue can facilitate doing class work tasks and make it meaningful.	71	19	10
	71%	19%	10%
The use of mother tongue can motivate the interaction between students and teachers in target language.	66	21	13
	66%	21%	13%

### Discussion

The first question of the study is “*When can mother tongue be employed in Saudi EFL classrooms?*”. The results of the first five statements of the questionnaire which were displayed in table (4.1) shows that the majority of teachers (73%) stated that mother tongue should sometimes be used in EFL classroom. (75%) of the teachers who participated in this study use mother tongue sometimes to explain grammar concepts. Furthermore, in teaching vocabulary, (77%) of the teachers considered that using the mother tongue is sometimes used for explaining words that cannot be explained in the target language. While (75%) of them stated they use mother tongue sometimes to explain to the students how to do an activity and (78%) sometimes use it to facilitates understanding English language structure. These results provide important insights into the use of mother tongue in Saudi EFL classroom as most of the teachers employ it to:

1. Explain grammar concepts.
2. Explain the meaning of new vocabulary.
3. Explain to the students how to do an activity.
4. Facilitates understanding English language structure.

The aim of the last five statements of the questionnaire is to give an answer the second question of this study: “*What are the purposes of using mother tongue in EFL classrooms?*” In the second part of the questionnaire, which aimed to investigate the purposes of using mother tongue in EFL classrooms. (80%) of the teachers who responded to this study agreed that students can use Arabic language during doing pair and group works, as they often need to use their mother tongue to talk about the tasks. While (73%) the participants agreed that the use of mother tongue can help in accessing the English language input of the students and thereby enhance learning. The majority of the teachers (82%) agreed that the use of mother tongue may reduce students' anxiety and creates a more relaxing learning atmosphere. There are (71%) from the participants agreed that the use of mother tongue can facilitate doing class work tasks and make it meaningful. The result of the last statement showed that (66%) of the teachers agreed that the use of mother tongue can motivate the interaction between students and teachers in target language. The results of the last five statements clearly showed that the purposes of using mother tongue in EFL classrooms are for:

1. Helping the students to do activities.
2. Enhancing the students learning.
3. Creating a more relaxing learning atmosphere.
4. Facilitating class work tasks and making it meaningful.
5. Motivating the interaction between students and teachers in the target language.

### Findings

To sum up, the results of the questionnaires which based on teachers' answers showed most of them do not oppose the use of mother tongue in EFL classrooms. In addition, the majority of these teachers supported that the mother tongue should use in some situations when it is necessary in the EFL classroom.

Thus, the main findings of this study are:

1. Most of the English language teachers agree that mother tongue should sometimes be used in Saudi EFL classrooms.
2. The majority of the teachers agreed that the mother tongue should be used in necessary situations such as helping students understand the meaning of unknown vocabulary and to explain difficult grammar concepts.
3. The main purposes of using mother tongue in Saudi EFL classroom are to help students doing their activities and facilitate classroom task.
4. Using mother tongue with EFL students reduce their anxiety and creates a more relaxing learning atmosphere.

### Recommendations

1. English language teachers use L1 in order to help students understand the meaning of unknown vocabulary and to explain difficult grammar and language structure.
2. Mother tongue can be used as a mediating tool when it is used appropriately, and teachers must be careful on encouraging students to use their mother tongue.

3. Mother tongue should be used to motivate the students to use English language in the classroom.
4. Further study may look into the students' use of L1 in L2 classrooms.
5. Further study may look into the effects of the use of L1 on the success of the students.

### Conclusion

The descriptive statistics of percentages were used to analyze the quantitative data which were basically derived from the questionnaire showing that the majority of teachers stated that they sometimes use their mother tongue to explain concepts while some of them rarely use it. This indicates that the Arabic language is often used to explain new concepts. The teacher might face the problem that some aspects of the English language cannot be understood unless the mother tongue is used for more clarification. Furthermore, in teaching vocabulary, many teachers consider that using the mother tongue is quite helpful and sometimes necessary for explaining words that cannot be explained in the target language.

### Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this study is that, since the study was conducted on teachers who teach English language as a foreign language, at secondary levels, the results were limited only to the teachers in these schools. If it were applied at different levels and schools, it could have some different results. In addition, the teachers were expected not to make any changes in their teaching. The answers given to the questionnaires were assumed to be sincere and reflect their real thoughts and feelings honestly. A further study that will look into the same dimensions as the present study may use longitudinal studies and a higher number of participants.

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