Foreign Language Learners' Attitudes and Perceptions of L1 Use in L2 Classroom

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Abstract
Whether to avoid learners' first language (L1) or to make use of it in the second language (L2) classes is a controversial issue. Some studies have challenged the effectiveness of the monolingual approach to foreign language learning. This study investigates Saudi university learners' attitudes and perceptions towards incorporating their L1(Arabic) in English class. This study also sheds light into the relationship between students' perceptions and proficiency level in the target language. To this end, Gaebler's questionnaire (2014) was administered to 60 female learners studying in the preparatory year at a Saudi university. They were from three different English proficiency levels. The results showed that advanced learners hold a negative attitude towards the use of L1 in their English classes, whereas elementary and intermediate learners generally perceive the judicious use of their L1 positively.
Keywords: learners' attitudes, Learning foreign language, L1 use, monolingual approach, role of L1

Introduction

The issue of how to teach a foreign\second language (L2) has always been debated. The Reform Movement in the 1880s came as an opposing movement to the practices of the grammar-translation method that was dominating foreign language teaching at the time. That teaching method was basically characterized by the excessive use of learners' first language as the main medium of instruction to master the grammar of the foreign language. Developments in language theories, however, opened new horizons for language teaching methods and approaches. One example of these methods was the direct method, which prohibits the use of learners' mother tongue and calls for teachers who are native speakers of the L2. The underpinning view of this method was that the L2 is acquired in the same way the first language (L1) is acquired by children (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The debate about whether to use learners' L1 in L2 classes or to avoid it is not new. There is an extensive body of literature that has addressed this issue. Practitioners and researchers are constantly attempting to prove their view of L1 use either as essential or detrimental in foreign language teaching. While some practitioners believe that L1 plays an important role in foreign language classrooms, others argue that using L1 is a hindrance and that it diminishes the learner's exposure to the target language.

Some educational institutions insist on adopting the monolingual approach to teaching their students; that is, they allow only the use of the target language regardless of their students' attitudes towards this approach or even the achieved learning outcomes of the students. The aim of this study was to investigate university students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the use of L1 (Arabic) in L2 (in this case, English) classes and to examine the relationship between students' attitude toward using Arabic and their proficiency level in English.

Literature Review
Arguments and Counter Arguments for Only-L2 Use in L2 Classes
According to Zhao and Macaro (2014), there are three stances regarding the language used in L2 teaching settings: the total exclusion of L1 in target language instruction, the favored and maximized use of L2 as the medium of instruction, and the use of L2 coupled with judicious use of L1. Advocates of the complete exclusion of L1 in the target language instruction build their belief on a number of assumptions.

Cook (2001) identifies two reasons for those who advocate only L2 use in L2 classes. First, the L2 learning process is similar to the process of L1 learning. This claim seems to be weak, particularly when it comes to comparing children acquiring their L1 with adults learning an L2. Bley-Vroman (1990) challenges the claim of existing similarities between L1 and L2 acquisition by presenting some differences between children's acquisition of L1 and adults' L2 learning. He contends that the innate ability that children have to acquire their L1 disappears in adulthood. Additionally, children have zero knowledge about their L1 when they learn it, unlike adults, who depend on their L1 to learn the L2. Moreover, according to Bley-Vroman, the motivation and amount of exposure to the language are higher in children acquiring an L1 than in adults acquiring an L2. The second reason identified by Cook (2001) is that the acquisition processes of L1 and L2

are completely separate. The authors believe that the instances of L1 interference and transfer occurring in the L2 are clear evidence that the learning processes are inseparable.

Zhao and Macaro (2014) point out that the call for L1 avoidance in L2 classrooms can be based on Krashen's input hypothesis and Long's interaction hypothesis. Krashen (1992) claims that exposure to comprehensible input increases the learner's opportunity to acquire the language. He adds that comprehensible input should be accompanied by facilitative affective factors, such as high motivation and self-confidence, for language acquisition to take place. However, Gass (1988), argues that "it is clear that input of some sort is necessary in order for acquisition to take place. What sort of input is necessary is less clear" (p.201). She doubts that students can convert the language used as input to output. This means that increasing the exposure to L2 may not enhance language acquisition because the input is not necessarily going to be intake and that there are other factors besides input that should be considered. Another argument for the exclusive use of L2 is based on Long's interaction hypothesis, which maintains that the negotiation of meanings in L2 enhances L2 acquisition (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). However, full application of this hypothesis is not always practical if time constraints and huge classrooms are considered because negotiation of meanings can be time-consuming. Insufficient evidence and lack of clear reasons for avoiding the use of L1 in L2 classrooms has encouraged practitioners and researchers to investigate further the role of L1 in foreign language teaching and how it can be used to facilitate L2 learning (Macaro, 2001).

L1 Role in L2 Classrooms

Research has been carried out to observe the different dimensions of the L1 role in L2 learning. It has been found that L1 use has various benefits to offer in the L2 classroom. Atkinson (1987), for example, contends that L1 use is advantageous for three reasons. First, translation is the preference of the majority of learners. Second, L1 use is a technique that gives learners the chance to express their feelings and ideas. Finally, L1 is a useful technique for the best exploitation of class time. McMillan and Rivers (2011) further claim that careful and controlled use of the L1 can be profitable for social, communicative, and cognitive purposes in L2 learning. Cook (2001) believes that teachers can make use of learners' native language in difficult grammar explanation, new vocabulary teaching, and classroom management. These crucial functions that the L1 has for explaining difficult grammar and new lexical items are reported in a number of studies in addition to L1 use for compensating for lack of comprehension (Edstrom, 2006; Macaro, 2001; Mattioli, 2004; Polio & Duff, 1994). Turnbull (2001), however, argues that taking Cook's suggested functions for L1 use into consideration leave only limited functions for the target language. As such, Turnbull calls for further research on how and when the L1 should be used. Edstrom (2006), in her analysis of her teaching, finds that L1 was useful in clarification of assignments, grading policies, and classroom strategies. She adds that learners' cultural misconceptions were only countered by the use of L1.

The facilitating role of L1 goes beyond classroom activities and teaching vocabulary or grammar. Research has further explored the beneficial role of L1 in learning and teaching language skills (Nazary, 2008). For instance, Koren (1997), after observing students listening to the target language and taking notes in the L1, concludes that taking notes in the L1 is a good strategy for understanding. As for writing skills, Hamin and Majid (2006) find improvement in the writing

performance of students who use their mother tongue to generate ideas. Cole (1998), meanwhile, argues that using L1 is seen as inappropriate and unjustifiable when it comes to speaking and listening activities unless instructions need clarification or there are cultural concepts that are crucial for comprehension.

In addition to the aforementioned role of L1, it has been found that learners' native language plays a primary role in reducing the affective barriers to L2 learning, thereby assisting comprehension and facilitating L2 acquisition (Auerbach, 1993; Meyer, 2008). According to Baily (2005), allowing L1 use can motivate learners and increase their confidence in using L2.

Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of L1 Use

The issue of using the mother tongue in L2 classrooms has attracted the attention of researchers investigating teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes. McMillan and Rivers (2011) in a study they conducted in Japan find that many native English-speaker teachers in a communicative framework perceive the use of the students' L1, either by the students or by the teachers, beneficial for the enhancement of L2 learning. In another study, Gaebler (2014) investigates graduate students' and professors' perceptions of L1 use. He concludes that some students believe that the use of their L1 is a hindrance to their L2 learning, while others feel comfort with the use of L1. As for the professors, they respect the students' views and attempt to integrate L1 in teaching L2. Nazary (2008) conducts a study in Iran, and he reports that Iranian university students are hesitant to use their L1. However, a recent study in Iran conducted by Sa'd and Qadermazi (2015) that examines the use of L1 from the perspectives of Iranian elementary EFL learners and teachers concludes that there is a positive attitude toward the role and use of L1. They note that only a minority prefer the only-English policy, while the majority favore the limited and judicious use of L1.

In the Saudi EFL classroom context, few studies have investigated the perceptions of teachers and students on the use of L1 in L2 classroom settings. Al-nofaie (2010) investigates the attitudes of teachers and learners in an intermediate school in Jeddah. In her study, she concludes that teachers and learners are in agreement regarding the positive effects of using Arabic, but they hold different perceptions regarding the purposes and functions of the L1. Alshammary (2011) also examines the attitudes of college teachers and students of pre-intermediate level in Madinah. The results show that the majority of teachers and students believe that L1 should be used in English classes. The purposes they deemed Arabic useful for are explaining new vocabulary and explaining difficult ideas and concepts.

Although the literature is filling up with studies that explore the attitudes and perceptions of learners about L1 use in L2 classes, it still lacks studies, especially in the Saudi context, that explicitly investigate the relationship between the learners' attitudes toward L1 use and their proficiency level in the L2. On these grounds, this study aimed to examine Saudi university EFL learners' attitudes and perceptions of L1 use in only-English classrooms and the relationship between their attitudes and their proficiency level in English.

Purpose of the Study

One of the important objectives in most Saudi universities is to improve learners' English language to prepare them for their major studies, which are mostly delivered in English. For this purpose, universities allocate the first year to some basic knowledge courses like mathematics and communication skills in addition to intensive English courses. The only-English approach is implemented strictly in some English programs regardless of learners' level in English. Based on previous studies like the ones mentioned above and other studies in the literature (Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Khresheh, 2012; Alrabah et al, 2016), and based on the fact that students and teachers, not administrators, are the best ones to decide on what language should be used in the classroom (McMillian & Rivers, 2011), this study aimed to examine university Preparatory Year learners' perception of L1 use in English classes and the relationship between their perspectives and proficiency level in L2. Thus, the research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions of university students toward using their L1 in the foreign language classroom?
2. Is there a relationship between students' attitudes toward using their L1 and their level of proficiency in the target language?

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The Preparatory Year Program at the university where the study took place offers intensive English courses to equip students with English academic skills which are necessary for students to pursue their future majors at the university. Upon university admission, students sit for a placement test that places them in English courses according to their proficiency level: beginner, intermediate, or advanced. The program follows a strict only-English policy, where neither teachers nor students are allowed to use Arabic in class. In this study, the participants were 60 Saudi female students. The students were from three different proficiency classes, with 20 students from each class selected randomly. The first language of the participants was Arabic, and all of them had studied English for at least six years. All the learners gave their consent to participate in the study.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire adopted from Gaebler's study (2014), with only a few modifications related to the names of the languages addressed in the study, Arabic as L1 and English as L2 (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was designed to collect information about students' opinions about the appropriateness and purposes of using L1 by their teachers, their classmates, and themselves in the L2 class. The questionnaire consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions. Some questions had the choice of 'other' where the participants could add their answer if it was not mentioned in the choices that were given. The questionnaire was administered in English for advanced students and in Arabic for a beginner- and intermediate-level students to ensure adequate comprehension of the questionnaire's items.

Results

Students showed different attitudes toward whether or not Arabic should be used in English classes, question 1. Beginners (level A, hereafter) surprisingly do not seem to be advocating the incorporation of Arabic; 70% of them answered with 'no', and only 30% answered affirmatively. Advanced students (level C, hereafter) similarly expressed negative attitudes, with 80% believing that Arabic should not be used. In contrast, the responses of the intermediate students (level B, henceforth) reflected the more neutral position, with 50% accepting and 50% rejecting the use of Arabic (see Figure 1).
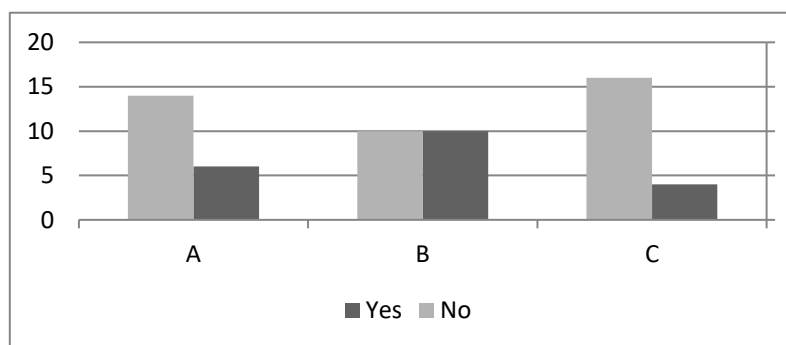

Figure 1. Should Arabic be used in the English classroom?

For the second question, 'How often should your teacher use Arabic in the classroom?' the majority of level C believed that teachers should never use Arabic (75%), and a minority felt that rare and sometimes use would be acceptable (15% and 10% respectively). Level A and level B perspectives were comparable, with 50% and 55% for rare use and 40% and 30% for sometimes use respectively (see Figure 2).
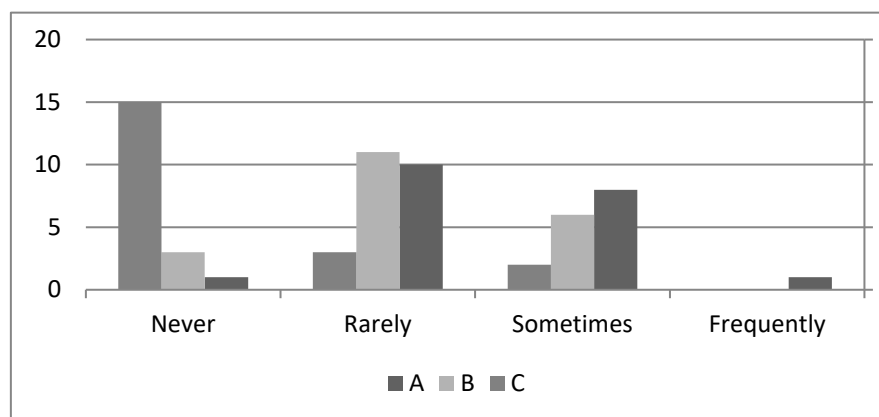

Figure 2. How often should your teacher use Arabic in the classroom

In selecting the appropriate purposes for the teacher's use of Arabic, question 3, the participants could choose more than one answer. The results in Figure 3 show that students at all levels do not face difficulty in understanding teachers' instructions or see a role for Arabic in

suggesting learning strategies. As for defining new vocabulary and explaining complex grammar, Level A and B responses were identical, 55% and 65% respectively, whereas explaining difficult concepts and ideas was 70% for level A and 60% for B. In contrast, 25% of level C believed in the importance of Arabic for defining new vocabulary, while 60% thought that teachers should not use Arabic. In the option 'other', about 25% of level A and 20% of level C students expressed that teachers should use Arabic to explain difficult vocabulary items that cannot be explained by other means to give advice for exams or in case of an emergency.
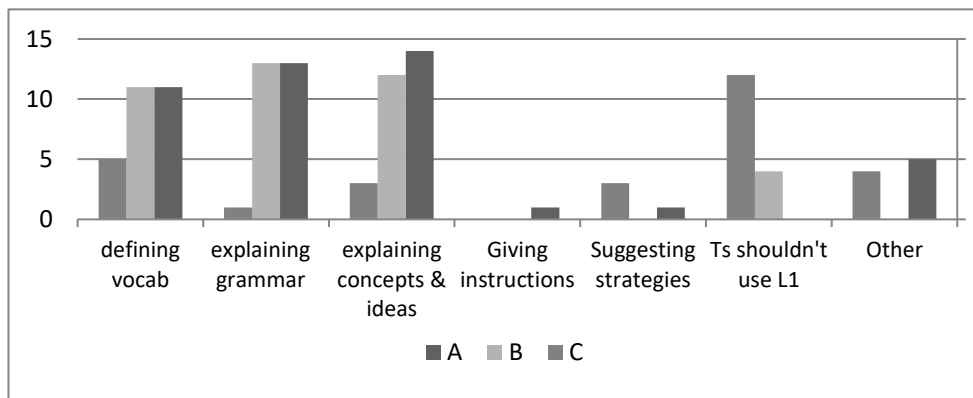

Figure 3. When do you think it is appropriate for your teacher to use Arabic in the classroom?

Regarding their view of how often their classmates should use Arabic in the English classroom, question 4, the majority of level A supported rare use, 40%, and exclusion of Arabic use, 20%, while 25% responded with 'sometimes'. Level B students seem to be the most advocators of L1 use by classmates because 55% of the responses were for 'sometimes' compared to 25% and 20% responses for 'rarely' and 'never'. In comparison, level C responses showed that 40% preferred exclusion of Arabic, 25% favored rare use, and, surprisingly, 35% believed that classmates could 'sometimes' use Arabic (see Figure 4).
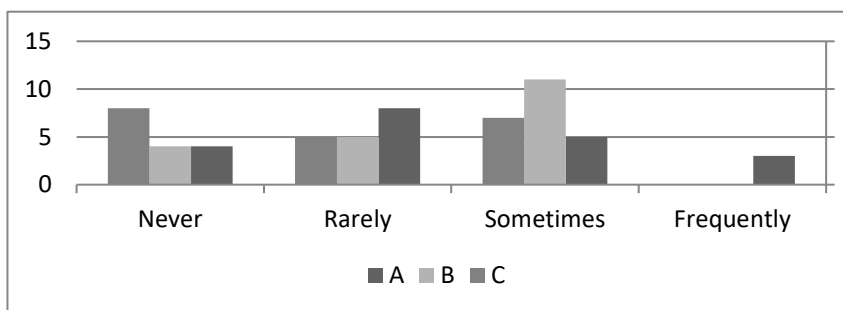

Figure 4. How often should your classmates use Arabic in the classroom?

Regarding for what purposes classmates can use Arabic, question 5, students in levels A, B, and C responded with 40%, 30%, and 60% respectively that students should not use Arabic. Participants from all levels similarly selected the use of Arabic when speaking to other

classmates, with 25% for level A, 30% for level B, and 20% for level C. The results also showed that using Arabic in taking notes was the choice of levels B and A, with 45% and 20% respectively. Regarding the option 'other', 25% of level A specified that Arabic can be used to foster comprehension (see Figure 5).
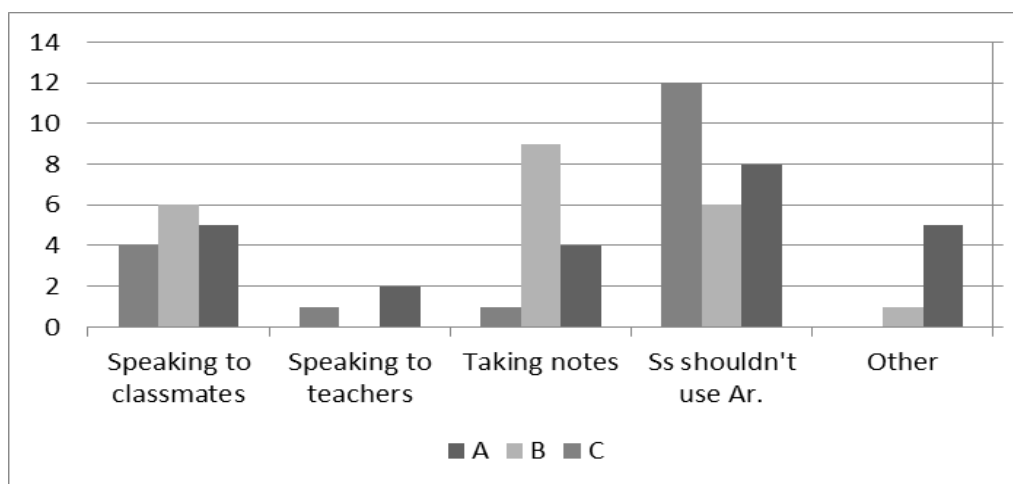

Figure 5. When do you think it is appropriate for your classmates
to use Arabic in the classroom?

As for question 6, the majority of participants from levels A, B, and C, (60%, 70%, 40% respectively) thought that speaking Arabic with classmates is appropriate for clarifying concepts and ideas. Defining new vocabulary was the second favored function for using Arabic among classmates, with 50% for level A, 40% for level B, and 30% for level C, while explaining grammar came in third place, with 35% for level A and B and only 15% for level C (see Figure 6).
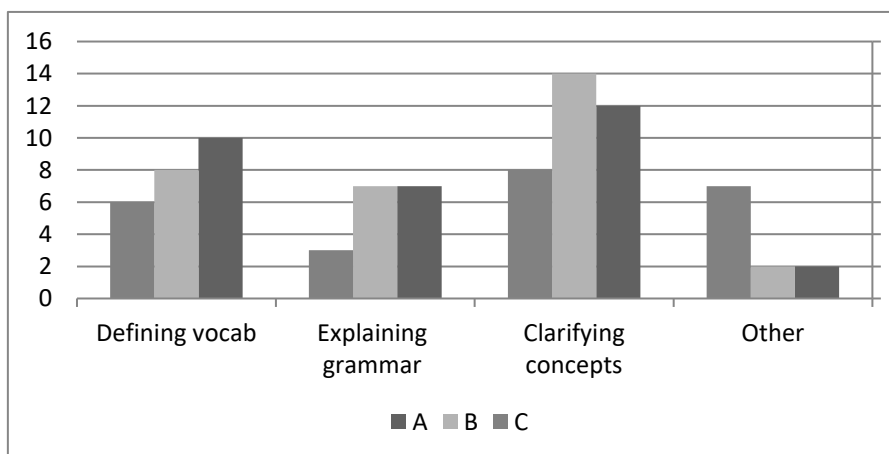

Figure 6. If you think it is appropriate for students to use Arabic
with their classmates, why

The differences among the three levels became clearer in how they perceived the usefulness of Arabic (see Figures 7 and 8). While 40% and 45% of level C believed that Arabic does not help them learn English or helps them just a little, question 7, 70% of level B and 45% of level A thought that Arabic helps them a fair amount. Additionally, 40% of level A believed that Arabic helps a lot in learning English. In expressing in what way Arabic is helping, question 8, the majority of levels A, 60%, and B, 70%, saw Arabic as helpful for understanding difficult concepts and for understanding new and difficult vocabulary, 70% & 55% respectively. Comparable responses were expressed by level C students, with 45% for understanding difficult concepts and 35% for understanding vocabulary. Only a few students, however, expressed that Arabic makes them feel at ease and less stressed.
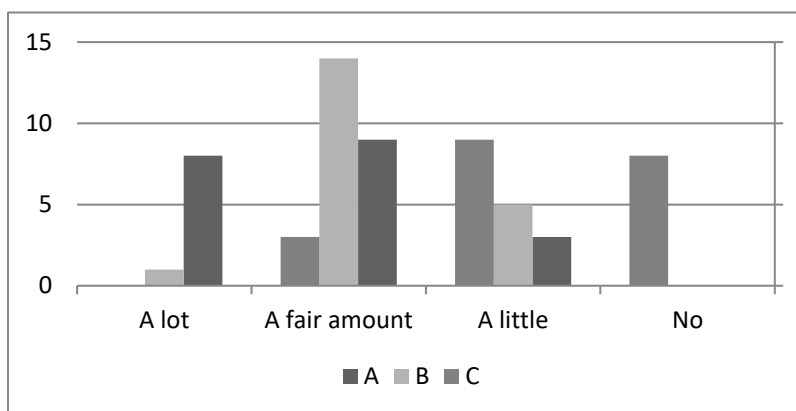

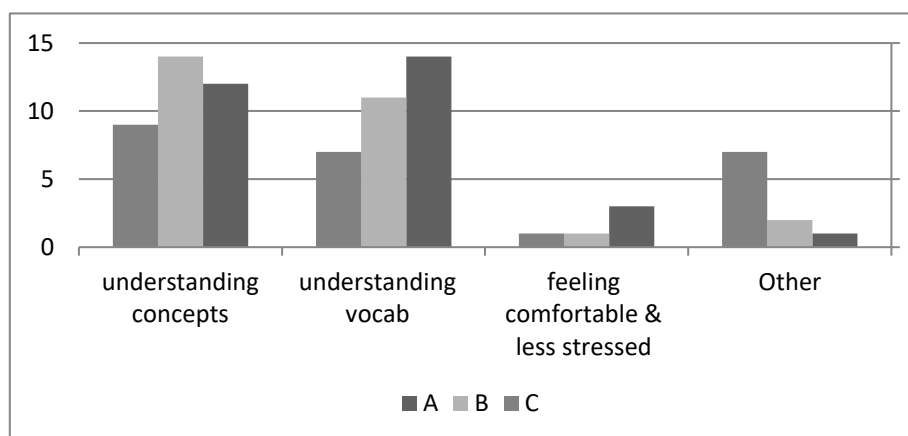*Figure 7.* Do you think the use of Arabic in the classroom helps you learn English?

Figure 8. If you think the use of Arabic is helpful in the English classroom, why?

Students' perceptions about whether Arabic prevents English learning, question 9, were similar across the three levels (see Figure 9). The majority believed that Arabic prevents them a little to a fair amount of English learning, while 30% of A, 35% of B, and 15% of C thought that Arabic does not prevent their English learning at all.
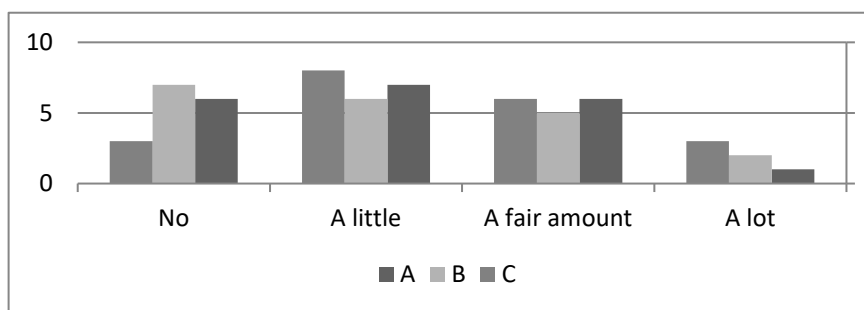
Figure 9. Do you think the use of Arabic in the classroom prevents you from learning English?

With regard to question 10, the majority of the students in levels A, B, and C expressed that Arabic can be harmful because it limits their exposure to English, 50%, 45%, and 55% respectively, and allows them to avoid speaking in English, 40%, 65%, and 55% respectively. Of level C, 65% added that Arabic might prevent them from thinking in English (see Figure 10).
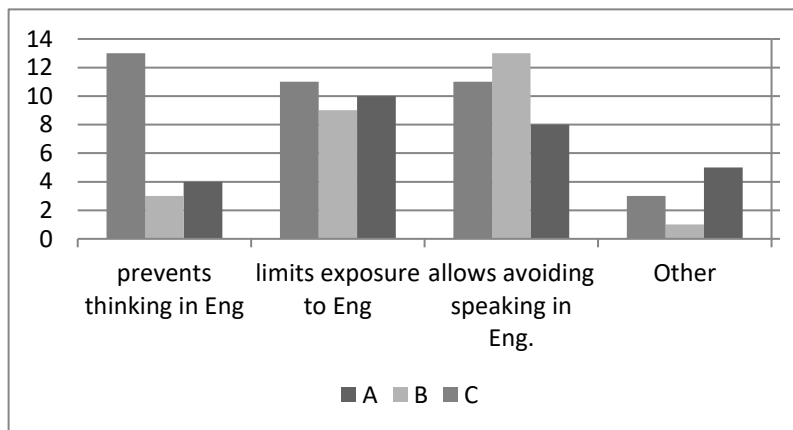

Figure 10. If you think the use of Arabic is harmful in the English classroom, why?

Discussion

In responding to the two research questions about students' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of Arabic in the foreign language classroom and their relation to students' level of proficiency in English, the beginners seemed reluctant to accept the use of Arabic despite their low proficiency. This may be the result of their teachers' insistence on avoiding Arabic or from the concept that immersion in the target language leads to better learning. In the rest of the questionnaire, however, beginner students felt more comfortable admitting their need for the use of Arabic and expressed the usefulness of Arabic for understanding new vocabulary and difficult grammar. They believed that teachers could use L1 for the mentioned functions, whereas students' use of L1 should be limited. This reflects students' positive attitude only toward controlled use of Arabic and that Arabic may be harmful to certain aspects. This result is in alignment with Alnofaie's (2010) study mentioned above and other relevant studies (Sa'd & Qadermazi, 2015). Intermediate students, in contrast, expressed more freely their preference for Arabic use for functions similar to those mentioned by the beginners. Although the results here comply with Alshammary's (2011) findings, they contradict with what Nazary (2008) found about intermediate learners as being the

most hesitant about L1 use. The only explanation that can be drawn here is that these students are satisfied with their level in English, and so they are not afraid of Arabic preventing their learning; rather, they see it as a shorter way for comprehension. Advanced learners, meanwhile, expressed a negative attitude toward the use of Arabic. The majority believed that Arabic should be avoided by teachers and students. A few believed that Arabic could be helpful for understanding vocabulary and concepts. It is clear that advanced students refrain from using their L1 because they are competent enough to manage negotiation of meanings in the L2. These results seem to be compatible with those of previous studies that investigated students' perceptions in terms of attitudes and preferred functions of L1 such as Alnofaie's (2010), Alshammary's (2011), Gaebler's (2014), and Sa'd and Qadermazi's (2015).

Conclusion and Implications

From the collected and analyzed data, it is evident that students' proficiency level plays a role in their attitudes and perceptions about L1 use. The results suggest considering modifications in educational institutions' policies regarding what language to be allowed in foreign language classrooms in a manner that can contribute to enhancing students' learning. The findings of the present study, however, show variation in perspectives among students from the same level, and this suggests that proficiency is not the only factor that affects students' perspectives. Other factors, such as motivation and risk-taking, may influence students' perceptions and attitudes. Triangulation of data collection could have added to the validity and reliability of the results of this study, but time constraints allowed only for one instrument. Further research that uses triangulated data is suggested for investigating the relationship between proficiency and perceptions of students. Further research can also be carried out to examine the influence of other factors on students' perceptions of L1 use.

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Appendix A. Student Questionnaire
Using Arabic in the English Classroom
Name: -------------------------------   **English class level:** A   B   C

This questionnaire aims to find out about your attitude toward using Arabic in the English classroom. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Thank you!

1. Should Arabic be used in the English classroom? (circle your answer)
 a. Yes   b. No

 2. How often should your teacher use Arabic in the classroom?
 a. Never   b. Rarely   c. Sometimes   d. Frequently

3. When do you think it is appropriate for your teacher to use Arabic in the classroom?
(You can choose more than one)

a. Defining new vocabulary
b. Explaining complex grammar points
c. Explaining difficult concepts or ideas
d. Giving instructions
e. Suggesting learning strategies
f. Teachers should never use Arabic
g. Other. Please specify _____

 4. How often should your classmates use Arabic in the classroom?
 a. Never   b. Rarely   c. Sometimes   d. Frequently

5. When do you think it is appropriate for your classmates to use Arabic in the classroom?
(You can choose more than one)
 a. Speaking to the teacher
 b. Speaking to other classmates
 c. Taking notes

d. Students should never use Arabic
e. Other. Please specify _____

6. If you think it is appropriate for students to use Arabic with their classmates, why?
(You can choose more than one)

a. Defining vocabulary items
b. Explaining grammar points
c. Clarifying difficult concepts or ideas
d. Other, please specify _____

7. Do you think the use of Arabic in the classroom helps you learn English?
a. No b. A little c. A fair amount d. A lot
8. If you think the use of Arabic is helpful in the English classroom, why?
(You can choose more than one)
a. Helps me understand difficult concepts
b. Helps me understand new vocabulary
c. Makes me feel at ease, comfortable, and less stressed
d. Other. Please specify _____

9. Do you think the use of Arabic in the classroom prevents you from learning English?
a. No b. A little c. A fair amount   d. A lot
10. If you think the use of Arabic is harmful in the English classroom, why?
(You can choose more than one)

a. Prevents me from thinking in English
b. Limits my exposure to English
c. Allows me to avoid speaking in English
d. Other, please specify _____