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## Language as a Medium of Grammar Instruction: Jordanian EFL Secondary-Stage Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

### ABSTRACT

This study examines EFL teachers' beliefs, practices, and the (mis)match between them in regard to the language used as a medium of grammar instruction. The participants are nine experienced female EFL secondary-stage Jordanian teachers. Data were collected through a mixed quantitative-qualitative descriptive-analytical approach. Teachers' beliefs were investigated by a questionnaire, their practices via a classroom observation checklist, and the (mis)match between them was discussed during a focus group of teachers. The results showed that all teachers' beliefs were matching their practices, a consistency that was attributed to contextual factors, students' preferences, students' language proficiency and teachers' experiences as learners.

### KEYWORDS

grammar teaching, mother tongue, language as a medium of instruction, teachers' beliefs, classroom practices

### 1. Introduction

The value and the role of using the mother tongue (L1) in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom is a controversial issue among teachers and researchers (Kharma & Hajjaj, 1989; Levine, 2003; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Voicu, 2012). To gain beneficial insights, language research (e.g., Ashton, 2014; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Pajares, 1992; Richards, 1996) suggested studying teachers' beliefs and practices which this paper investigates. Should grammar be taught using the first language (Arabic), the target language (English), or both?

In most EFL teaching contexts, teachers share L1 with their learners and the classroom is the only place where they are both exposed to L2 (Richards, 2017). The association of using L1 with the discredited Grammar-Translation Method made teachers shy away from using it (Cook G., 2010; Kelly & Bruen, 2015) despite empirically-evidenced reports (Butzkamm, 1998; Butzkamm & Caldwell,

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2009; Cook V, 2001; Cummins, 2007; Hall & Cook, 2012; Widdowson, 2003) showing that L1 is a viable pedagogical resource.

However, in Jordan, there has been little local research into teachers' beliefs and the amount and value of using L1 in EFL classrooms (e.g., Maqableh & Smadi, 2001), the purposes of using L1 (e.g., Hussein, 2013), and even less research on language transfer (e.g., Al-Zoubi & Abu-Eid, 2014). Similarly, there has been little qualitative research into teachers' grammar-related beliefs and practices. Since Jordanian EFL students' weakness in grammar has been established in a body of previous research (e.g., Alhabahba et al., 2016; Malkawi & Smadi, 2018; Mustafa, 2001), there was an urgent need to carry out more research to understand the Jordanian grammar teaching context in an attempt to reinforce the grammatical competence of Jordanian EFL learners. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are Jordanian EFL teachers' beliefs regarding the language used as a medium of grammar instruction?
- 2) What are Jordanian EFL teachers' actual practices related to the language used as a medium of grammar instruction?
- 3) How consistent are teachers' beliefs and actual classroom practices concerning language as the medium of grammar instruction?

## **2. Review of related literature**

Following the abandonment of the Grammar-Translation Method, using L1 was restricted in favour of the exclusive use of L2 in EFL classrooms (Cummins, 2007; Levine, 2003, Voicu, 2012) despite empirically-evidenced reports that L1 is a viable pedagogical resource (Butzkamm, 1998; Butzkamm and Caldwell, 2009; Cook V., 2001; Cummins, 2007; Hall & Cook, 2012; Widdowson, 2003). Translation during instruction was rejected by most structure and meaning-oriented language teaching methodologies (Voicu, 2012). The Direct and Audio-lingual methods abandoned using L1 to make students practice thinking in L2. The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Total Physical Response allowed using L1 exclusively for classroom management purposes. Communicative Language Teaching and Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis banned L1 use to maximize L2 input. Conversely, Community Language Learning permitted using L1 to make students feel more secure during conversations (Richards & Rodgers, 1982). Lozano's Suggestopedia theorized for learning in a comfortable environment in which L1 supposedly helps (Adamson, 2004). Some research findings supported using L1 to facilitate learning, reduce cognitive processing loads, lessen pressure on working memory, enhance verbal thinking and mental translation, and support vocabulary retention (e.g., Alley, 2005; Belz, 2002; Blyth, 1995; Kramsch, 1998; Levine, 2003, 2009, 2011).

Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) recommended using L1 in making meaning of a text, retrieving language from memory, exploring and expanding content, guiding through language tasks, and maintaining a dialogue. Nation (2003) advised teachers to maximize L2 use because their job is to develop the linguistic abilities of their students who rarely encounter English outside language classes. Levine (2003) recommended shaping an approach that is based on pedagogical training, language research results, and successful classroom experiences.

Cummins (2007, p. 1) listed three theoretical principles that contradict the monolingual assumptions. First, according to cognitive psychology, learning builds on prior knowledge whether it is encoded in L1 or L2. Second, across languages, literacy-related skills and knowledge, the lingual transfer is a normal process. The third principle is Cook's 'multi-competence' proposing that second language learners have special mental structures that are different from the monolinguals (p. 1).

In theoretical research, Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) called for a paradigm shift in foreign language teaching in terms of meaning, communication, understanding, grammar, and translation by benefitting from the use of L1 which is the "magic key that unlocks the door to foreign language grammars" (p. 385). Littlewood and Yu (2011) suggested a three-stage plan to use L1 inside EFL classrooms. At the presentation stage, teachers can use L1 to introduce structures to support language awareness (Butzkamm, 2003; Dodson, 1972). At the practice stage, it can be used in drilling to help learners produce similar structures (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Munro, 1999). At the production level, teachers can benefit Duff (1989), Auerbach (1993), and Deller and Rinvoluceri (2002) by the use of L1 in activities.

Voicu (2012, p. 214) suggested that using L1 should be invested with beginner learners for understanding grammatical rules through translation exercises and comparing the two languages' vocabulary and grammar. Richards (2017) questions whether foreign language teachers, predominantly non-native speakers worldwide, really need to have native-like language ability since the criteria for being a good teacher are having content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and discourse skills.

In empirical research, Copland and Neokleous (2011) investigated using L1 in two after-school Cypriot private language institutions. The observation of language classes showed that three out of the four teachers used L1 frequently during lessons. However, the post interviews revealed that all four teachers believe that using L1 should be very limited. Discussing the discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and practices revealed a sense of guilt toward what they considered a negative class routine. Scheffler (2012) investigated secondary school students' views of using translation during grammar lessons. Comparing grammar translation and communicative lessons, students reported that grammar translation lessons are not only more interesting and informative but also make them feel secure and confident.

Ahmad, Radzuan and Hussain (2018) investigated EFL teachers' and students' beliefs regarding using Arabic during grammar lessons at Saudi universities. The study first revealed that both female and male Arab and non-Arab teachers believed that Arabic can be used to guarantee understanding, maintain discipline, and take feedback. The reasons for using L1 were students' low English language proficiency, the teachers' attempt to build good relationships with students, and saving class time. Second, the non-Arab teachers believed that since the EFL classroom is the only place for exposure to L2, the use of Arabic should be planned.

In the Jordanian context, Maqableh and Smadi (2001) investigated the amount, value, and teaching aspects of using Arabic during English lessons. The results showed that teachers used the Arabic language most of the lesson time and this positively improved students' achievement. The questionnaire revealed that teachers and students support the use of L1. Hussein (2013) investigated the purposes of using Arabic during teaching English in private and governmental universities. The study revealed that Arabic is used mainly to help students understand new and difficult words, to explain complex syntactic rules, and to save time. Al-Zoubi and Abu Eid (2014) explored the influence of Arabic on learning English. 266 randomly chosen, first-year university students took a translation test that comprised 24 Arabic sentences that they had to translate into English. It was revealed that the percentage of correct answers was 47% and that errors committed had mainly to do with the verbs "to be" and the use of the passive voice where transfer errors were the highest.

### 3. Method and procedures

#### 3.1. Research context and participants

The participants of the study were nine experienced Jordanian female EFL eleventh and twelfth-grade teachers working in public schools of the Ramtha Directorate of Education in Jordan. The participants were chosen randomly from the fourteen secondary-stage EFL teachers in the city. Table 1 below summarizes the sample demographics:

Table 1. Participants of the study

No.	Qualification	Experience (in Years)	Grade Taught
1	MA	20	12
2	BA	21	11
3	MA	16	11
4	BA	22	12
5	BA	16	11
6	BA	2	12
7	BA	22	12

8	BA	15	12
9	BA	17	12

### 3.2. Data collection and procedure

This study used a mixed quantitative and qualitative descriptive-analytical approach. To answer the research questions, data were collected through the use of a questionnaire and a classroom observation checklist. The questionnaire was an adapted version of the questionnaire designed by Mohamed (2006). The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section collected demographic information pertaining to the teachers' qualifications, years of experience, and the grade(s) they teach (Table 1). The second one addressed the teacher-reported beliefs. The respondents are asked to rate each item on a five-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The second data collection tool in this study was a classroom observation checklist that was also adapted from Mohamed's (2006) questionnaire to identify the teachers' actual pedagogical practices in on-site grammar lessons. Nonetheless, in the current research, the items were incorporated into an observation checklist. The aim of the classroom observations, which lasted for one week, was to provide direct evidence of the participating teachers' grammar practices in terms of the medium of instruction. Due to the time restrictions and ensuing lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 epidemic (and later pandemic), each teacher was observed teaching one grammar lesson.

To establish their validity, the instruments of this study were reviewed by an expert jury of university professors of linguistics, curriculum and instruction, and measurement and evaluation who judged the appropriateness of the instruments for the purpose of the study. Since both instruments were adapted, the researcher did not pilot the instruments but rather deemed it sufficient that their reliability was established by the original author (see Mohamed, 2006, pp. 64–67). To maximize the credibility of the teachers' responses, teachers were assured that their contributions would only be used anonymously for the purposes of the current research.

Furthermore, the interrater reliability of the observation was established by having a colleague, who had taught English for 21 years, attend five lessons with the researcher who was the only observer of the other four lessons. Both observers did not interact with the teachers observed or the students, and the observed teachers were informed that the data collected were to be used solely for research purposes and that the observer(s) were not assessing them. The fellow teacher independently filled in the observation checklist. The correlation between the researchers' and the second rater's observations amounted to 0.97, which is appropriate for the purpose of this study. To maximize the credibility of the teachers' responses and to create a conducive research environment in which the

participating teachers felt safe to engage in conversations amongst themselves and with the researcher, they were assured that their contributions would only be used anonymously for the purposes of the current research.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The results of the first research question, which asks about the teachers' grammar-related beliefs about their own language use, are summarized in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Teachers' grammar-related beliefs as gleaned from the questionnaire

No.	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	%
1	I use Arabic during grammar lessons	4.11	0.928	82.2
2	I translate English grammar rules into Arabic	4.22	0.972	84.4

The study revealed that 82.2% of the respondents believed that they could use Arabic during grammar lessons, and 84.4% believed that they can translate rules to Arabic whenever needed.

The second research question addressed the teachers' grammar-related classroom practices. The data were collected through the researcher's notations on the classroom observation checklist filled out during classroom visits. The results are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Teachers' grammar-related practices as revealed by the observation

No.	Item	n	%
1	Using Arabic during a grammar lesson	8	88.9
2	Translating English grammar rules to Arabic whenever needed	8	88.9

The classroom observations revealed that during the grammar lesson, eight out of nine teachers (88.9%) used Arabic and translated English grammar rules to Arabic. Only one teacher (11.1%) did not use Arabic words and did not translate English grammar rules into Arabic.

Regarding the consistency between the teachers' beliefs and actual practices, all nine teachers' beliefs were consistent with their classroom practices. After finishing data collection and analysis, the researcher initiated a focus group by inviting the nine participating teachers to meet at a secondary school in Ramtha city in Jordan on September 2020. The focus group aimed at discussing the match between teachers' beliefs and practices and the potential factors dominating them.

## 4. Results

The questionnaire in this study showed that only one out of nine teachers believed that she should not use Arabic during grammar lessons nor translate rules to Arabic, a belief that she practised during her grammar lesson. During the focus-group

discussions, she commented on her belief saying, “why should I use Arabic when I can speak English fluently?”. She added that at the beginning of each school year, her students feel shocked because she does not say any Arabic words, but over time they become used to her style. She believed that if all teachers decided to speak exclusively English, students will work hard to master the English language at least to be able to understand what their teachers say. Her belief was supported by another teacher who said “using Arabic really deprives excellent students from listening to and speaking English, but it is a blessing to mediocre and weak students”.

In contrast, one participating teacher said that if she uses English as the only medium of grammar instruction throughout the lesson, she will surely find at the end that few students could understand her. A second teacher believed that there is no need to speak English all the time even if it is an English language class. A third teacher commented that she can explain the whole lesson in English but would feel uncomfortable because she knows that weak students will completely lose her. She added that even in the Scientific stream of the eleventh grade whose students are usually better than students of other branches, only three or four students can understand an English-only grammar lesson. Teachers also mentioned that they feel comfortable when they teach English grammar using Arabic because this is the way they were taught as students.

## 5. Discussion

The discussions showed first that using Arabic was relevant to direct contextual factors such as busy schedules, crowded classrooms, heavy teaching loads, long syllabi and time constraints, a result consistent with many studies (e.g., Assalahi, 2013; Basoz, 2014; Borg, 2003; Breen et. al., 2001; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Freeman, 2002; Mohammed, 1991, 1996; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Thabet, 2002; Yusof et al., 2019). Second, secondary-stage teachers take into consideration that their students are motivated by passing the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination and that nearly all of them are privately tutored. Third, students' low language proficiency force teachers to use L1 to guarantee students' understanding. Finally, teachers teach in the same way they were taught grammar as students, a conclusion mentioned by many studies (e.g., Farrell & Lim, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Yusof et al., 2019).

## 6. Conclusions and future implications

To summarize, this study investigated teachers' grammar-related beliefs and practices in an attempt to understand the context responsible for Jordanian students' weak grammatical competence. Based on the findings of the current study, it is recommended that EFL teachers maximize L2 input and that the Jordanian Ministry of Education enhances current teaching quality by training teachers to practice reflection to evaluate their practices and improve them.

## 7. Limitations of the study

The generalizability of the findings of this study can be limited by the following factors:

1. The study was limited to female secondary public schools in the Ramtha Directorate of Education, which is a part of the Irbid Third Directorate of Education during the Academic year 2019-2020; the findings can be generalized only to similar educational contexts in Jordan.
2. The study was restricted to the students of the eleventh- and twelfth-grades in female public secondary schools in the Ramtha Directorate of Education. So, results could be generalized to the students studying in similar conditions or contexts.
3. Because of the Covid-19 epidemic lockdown, the study lasted for only two weeks. A longer duration may have different results.
4. The participants of the study were just observed while the researcher, and often a colleague, were filling in a checklist. Grammar lessons were not audio-taped, nor video-recorded, which limits the retrievability and corroboration of the classroom observation data.
5. The targeted research item was the medium used for grammar instruction. The inclusion of other grammar-related aspects (e.g., the nature of grammar practice activities) may have widened the scope of the results.

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