Re-Examining the Role of L1 in the EFL Classroom

Mouhamad Mouhanna

Abstract

Many Institutions in the UAE have prohibited the use of L1 in the classroom which is commonly perceived to be an impediment to EFL learning. This pedagogical decision however, is not fully supported by research findings (Auerbach 1993, Atkinson 1993, Storch & Wigglesworth 2003), which suggest that L1 reduces learner anxiety (Atkinson 1993), plays a scaffolding role in collaborative tasks (Anton & DiCamilla 1998), and can be a source of ‘cognitive support’ for students language analysis and performing higher level work (Storch and Wigglesworth 2003).

This paper problematises the exclusion of L1 from the classroom and explores students’ perceptions of this policy and their own learning preferences at a tertiary institution in the UAE. It also examines students’ prior learning experiences in the secondary school contexts. Furthermore, it also provides an insight into the administrative bodies’ rationales for the English only policy. This process of problematising unquestioned assumptions is one of the fundamental tenets of Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook 2001); and was also adopted in Phillipson’s (1992) exploration of the EFL profession’s failure to question the following dominant fallacies of the EFL world:

- English is best taught monolingually
- The ideal teacher of English is a native like speaker
- The earlier English is taught, the better the results
- The more English is taught the better the results
- If other languages are used much standards of English will drop (p.185)

After surveying a total 124 students from three levels of English proficiency at a foundations English program in a UAE tertiary institution, various findings emerged.
Firstly, level 1 students indicated a higher level of support for L1 (mean: 2.05) use compared to Level 3 students (mean: 3.03). Secondly, students’ reported experiences with learning English at the secondary school level indicated that teachers relied heavily on the use of L1 in their ESL teaching. Furthermore, most students saw potential benefits for their own use of L1 in their learning, with level one students (2.3) demonstrating more support for this than level three students (3.29). Also addressing the policies used by the institution indicates that the rationale used when deciding on this policy was not a pedagogical one rather one based on the history and perceived frustrations with the secondary school system.

The study supports the notion of incorporating students’ input into pedagogical decision making processes. Students displayed a relative need for L1 support depending on their levels of proficiency, with less proficiency requiring more L1 support. Students also displayed an awareness that over-reliance on L1 would be a barrier to their learning as it had been for some in their secondary school experiences.

**Introduction**

The place of the first language in the acquisition of the second language has been the subject of much research. There have been various shifts to and from the utilization of the first language in EFL over the past few decades, depending on the accompanying political contexts and trends in EFL methods. Auerbach (1993) highlights that there seems to be an all or nothing approach to L1 use, with the translation method incorporating excessive amounts of L1 input, while many classrooms today discourage its use altogether (p.15).

The use of the learners’ mother tongue is a controversial pedagogical issue in many EFL programs in the UAE. Prior to teaching in the UAE, I would have thought that being an Arabic speaking ESL teacher would be an asset to an institution whose main clientele were native Arabic speakers. My previous TESOL position was at an Australian technical college, where educators were encouraged to acknowledge the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students in the classroom. I am aware that the dynamics of EFL and
ESL in English speaking countries vary, as ESL students are immersed in English outside the ESL classroom, while EFL students predominantly gain exposure to English in the EFL classroom. However, L1 can be an efficient tool for achieving student comprehension of vocabulary and of difficult concepts and instructions. Hence, since teaching in the UAE, the issue of L1 use has proven to be a central pedagogical concern for me, and I have admittedly gradually moved away from no utilization of L1, to allowing the use of minimal amount which I have found valuable in maximizing my students’ learning especially with lower level learners.

Generally, I can see the value of approaching L1 as a constructive EFL pedagogical tool for students but I am also aware that its use creates potential pitfalls that can undermine students’ L2 learning. This piece of research attempts to explore the pedagogical issue of L1 use in the classroom.

**Contextual Background and Current Practice**

Within Higher education institutions in the UAE, English is the medium of instruction, which is also the case in the EFL program with which I am currently employed. Most other EFL programs in the UAE also support the notion of an English only environment, based on the assumption that L1 use impedes learning. Prior to 2006, the instructor evaluation system for the program was designed to prohibit Arabic use. For example, the student Evaluation of the instructor document included ‘Always uses English for instruction’; to which students responded to what extent they agreed or disagreed in relation to their instructor. More recently, this statement has been removed from the document, which demonstrates a more realistic stance toward limited L1 use although it is still highly discouraged.

Many students demonstrate a degree of animosity to the completion of their studies in the English medium, and struggle a great deal in the English foundations program. One of the ways to minimise this level of antagonism that is a source of impediment to their performance is to challenge the notion that English is superior to students’ mother tongue, through emphasising to students the significance and contribution of the mother
tongue. One of the biggest challenges for teachers in attempting to do this is the institution’s policy of not using Arabic in the English classroom.

Furthermore, the exclusion of L1 from the EFL classroom has been made with some input from teachers, but no input from the learners themselves, on whose behalf these pedagogical decisions are made. Auerbach (1993) suggests that whether or not to use L1 in the EFL classroom should be a shared decision between the teacher and the students in the classroom. This study will explore the position held by students towards the use of Arabic in EFL learning, which has been somewhat neglected in the body of literature.

**Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

In Linguistic Imperialism, Phillipson’s explores the constituent fallacies that underlie the ELT profession, and which contribute to English linguistic hegemony, which he defines as “the explicit and implicit values, beliefs, purposes, and activities which characterize the ELT profession and which contribute to the maintenance of English as a dominant language” (p.73). One these ‘fallacies’ is the monolingual fallacy which is the belief that English is best taught monolingually.

This relatively unquestioned fallacy has underpinned the English only policy, where L1 is considered a hindrance to EFL learning. To problematise this unquestioned tenet is characteristic of critical theory, and Critical Applied Linguistics’ insistence upon problematizing givens (Pennycook, 2001, p. 7), where no aspect of our reality can be taken for granted in order to identify ‘naturalised’ assumptions (Dean, 1994, quoted in Pennycook, 2001, p. 7). It follows that CAL highlights this problematisation of givens for the EFL teacher, for pedagogical decisions made in the classroom, or those made at the administration level. Critical theory provides a sound theoretical framework for this study.

Another crucial tenet of CAL is an emphasis on preferred futures (Pennycook, 2001, p. 8), where CAL researchers express “utopian’ visions of alternative realities, by stressing the ‘transformative mission of critical work or the potential for change through awareness
and emancipation” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 8). This is to counteract the notion that critical work is often pessimistic and does not offer solutions or alternative. The current study is a process of problematizing the monolingual policy to provide an ‘alternative reality’ where students’ L1 is seen as a valuable tool for learning, rather than a hindrance that is banished from the classroom.

Phillipson (1992) also highlights that this fallacy comes hand in hand with the misconception that native speaking teachers are better than their non-native counterparts, and aids in further undermining potential equality between the two groups. Auerbach further adds that “insistence on the irrelevance of teachers’ knowing the learners’ languages may be de facto a justification for maintaining the status of native English speakers” (p. 29). Phillipson: ‘the ethos of monolingualism implies the rejection of the experiences of other languages, meaning the exclusion of the child’s most intense existential experience”. That is ‘Prohibiting the native language within the context of ESL instruction may impede language acquisition precisely because it mirrors disempowering relations” (Auerbach 1999, p. 16).

According to Phillipson (1992), the notion that L2 is best learned monolingually dates back to Gatenby who developed the tenet, in an article summarising ELT principles (Gatenby 1965, p.14 cited in Phillipson 1992, p. 185). More recently, this fallacy is supported with reference to the work of Krashen’s (1983) Monitor model which emphasises a natural approach to language acquisition, where L2 is believed to be acquired through the same process as L1, and where immense exposure to the L2 is required and consequently requires limited use of L1. Other researchers have also stressed the importance of L2 use in EFL, with L1 considered to be a hindrance to the learning process. Despite this, other researchers, including Cook (2001) argue that L1 can be useful in EFL learning, particularly in collaborative learning (p.234).

Various studies have illustrated the learning benefits for students of utilising some L1 in the classroom (Auerbach 1993, Atkinson 1993, Storch & Wigglesworth 2003). According to Auerbach, “evidence from research and practice is presented which suggests that the rationale used to justify English only in the classroom is neither
conclusive nor pedagogically sound.” Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) argue that L1 can give students ‘cognitive support’ that provides them with the ability to explore language and produce work that is of higher standard (p.760). They suggest that “teachers should not prohibit the use of some L1 altogether in group and pair work but should acknowledge that the use of the L1 may be a normal psychological process that allows learners to initiate and sustain verbal interaction” (p.768, 2003).

Anton and DiCamilla’s (1998) study demonstrated the role of L1 in scaffolding learners, and in optimizing learner interest in cognitively demanding tasks. These significant findings are mirrored in Scott De La Fuente’s (2008) study that explored the role of L1 in consciousness raising tasks, who concluded that the “use of L1 for these kinds of tasks may reduce cognitive overload, sustain collaborative interaction, foster the development of metalinguistic terminology” (p.111). Auerbach (1993) also describes various US based conclusive studies that support a role for L1 in the EFL classroom.

Studies which explore the attitudes perceptions of EFL teachers or students towards the use of L1 are limited however, with Auerbach referring to a small-scale questionnaire she distributed during a conference, where 80% of teachers responded that they sometimes allowed the use of L1. To this finding, she concludes “the English-only axiom is so strong that they didn’t trust their own practice: They assigned a negative value to ‘lapses’ into the L1, seeing them as failures or aberrations, a cause of guilt (p.14).” On the other hand, the beliefs and perceptions of learners towards the role of L1 in L2 learning, which is the main focus of this study has been a neglected topic in the body of literature. This study aims to explore students’ perceptions of the place of L1 in the EFL classroom, who as autonomous learners should reflect on the potential benefits of various learning tools and methods at their disposal. The research question aim to address the following:

1) Students’ perceptions of the role of L1 in the EFL classroom
   - What are students’ perceptions of the potential benefit of the use of L1 in the classroom?
   - Do the opinions of students at the different English levels vary?
To what extent do students support the notion that the EFL classroom should be an English only environment for maximize their learning? What reasons did students use to support their viewpoints?

2) Experiences with L1 use in the secondary school context

• What were students’ previous experiences of L1 use in the secondary school classroom?
• Were these experiences generally positive or negative and why?

3) Administration’s rationales for English only policy

• What is the policy regarding the use of L1 in the classroom and what is their rationale?

Methodology

The study is primarily based on the data gathered from a survey that contained a combination of closed and open ended questions. The survey was initially piloted with a smaller sample of student respondents, which was then edited prior to a larger scale distribution. The survey was also bilingual (Arabic and English) to accommodate the needs of the lower level students.

Students were asked a series of questions through the 5 point likert scale with one being strongly agree, to strongly disagree for five. The likert scale limited the generalisability of the results, however, due to the absence of an initial hypothesis it was appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study. The incorporation of open ended questions invited honest personal comments from the respondents, and their use was aimed at capturing authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty which is the primary asset of qualitative data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison p. 255). Open ended questions also provided qualitative data that added depth to the study.
After piloting and various edits, the final survey contained a total of twenty-one questions. Questions 1 and 2 asked students about their opinion of Arabic use in English learning. Questions 3 - 5 were related to Arabic use in the English classes in the secondary school context, while question six was a checklist of various ways that Arabic could be used in the classroom. The first and final questions were almost identical and were used to determine any deviations in students’ responses from the beginning for the survey to the end.

The sample of students to whom this survey was distributed were two higher level classes in each of the 3 levels namely beginner (level 1), intermediate (level 2) and advanced (level 3), which correspond to a beginner CEPA <165 intermediate 165-175 advances CEPA >175, respectively. The rationales for nominating these classes was that they were all new enrollments to the university with approximately six weeks of instruction and have just completed their secondary education in private and government schools.

Class teachers were instructed to inform students that the survey was voluntary and they were free to not participate in the study without consequences. Informed consent was sought from all participants in the study. Students were provided with information about the research, and were given the opportunity to seek clarification of any issues related the research. Students were also reassured that their anonymity in the research would be maintained.

The second method of data collection was through a semi-structured interview with the head of EFL program. This part of the research was aimed at gaining more insight into the administration’s rationale for the English only policy in the EFL classroom. During the interview, the program head was asked to expand on the policies of the university regarding the use of L1 in the classroom and to determine what his personal thoughts are on the topic and where the policy originated from. Furthermore, documentations were sought detailing university policy and they didn’t seem to exist. The interview with the head of the English program was used to complement the mixed method approach. This combination of the survey data collection method and the interview implies that the study adopted a mixed method approach.
There is some opposition to this mixed method approach with the justification based on the notion that research can either be scientific or constructivist, but not simultaneously both. In response to this opposition, Brewer and Hunter (1989) state:

“Social science methods should not be treated as mutually exclusive alternatives among which we must choose… Our individual methods may be flawed, but fortunately the flaws are not identical. A diversity of imperfection allows us to combine methods... to compensate for their particular faults and imperfections” (cited in Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998, p.16-17).

**Findings and Analysis**

For data analysis, the SPSS program was used to undertake a statistical analysis of the results. The open-ended responses were treated as qualitative data, and a content analysis was undertaken which allowed the researcher to access more in-depth data. According to Cohen et al, the use of a combination of statistical and qualitative data provides the researcher with the “the freedom to fuse measurement with opinion, quantity and quality” (p.253), which adds a more illustrative dimension to the statistical information.

Question 1 and question 11 (the final question), which were intentionally almost identical did not display any discrepancies in students’ responses, as the means were consistent and showed no significant change. For level 1 students, the mean was 2.05 to 1.73, level 2 was 3.13 and 2.60, while for level 3, it was 3.03 and 2.71, which indicate a slight but not so significant deviation. The Cronbach’s alpha was 0.64 and since it was over 0.5, there was no indication that the surveys were answered unfairly or randomly.

i) **Experiences with L1 use in the secondary school context**
Questions 3 to 5 addressed the topic about students’ previous experiences with the use of L1 in the secondary school classroom. When asked whether or not Arabic was used in the classroom, out of 124 students, 111 answered yes and the remaining 13 answered no. Those who responded no may have attended a private school system or may have studied abroad. Amongst the lower level students, there was a higher prevalence in the comments made about more Arabic use in the secondary as compared to university, and that teaching styles varied. Students’ comments suggested that the use of L1 in the secondary EFL classroom served the two main purposes of translating unfamiliar vocabulary and complex grammatical structures. For example, the following comments were written:

“At the secondary level, the teacher explained in English, and then re-explained by translating some of the words into Arabic, so that we would gain a better understanding.”

“When the teacher used to explain English grammar through the Arabic language we were able to understand but now we are ‘Deaf, dumb and blind.’”

Students’ comments also highlighted a difference in the teaching styles of secondary school teachers and the teachers in the tertiary EFL program. This finding was significant as students’ responses displayed a high degree of frustration with this sudden transition from an Arabic environment to an English environment. The policy is one where the L1 is prohibited is one that may seem extreme particularly when their secondary school experiences are taken into consideration. Students expressed frustration with these differences, and the fact that they were required to adapt quickly to the different teacher expectations. These differences adversely affected students’ levels of motivation, which for many resulted in academic failure.

The comments reflected different styles adopted in the secondary school in comparison to the university environment and these differences seemed to cause feelings of anxiety and stress, particularly with the lower level learners. The different learning styles reflected the different policies around the use of the Arabic language, where the secondary schools heavily used this pedagogical tool, and students had become accustomed to this. One
student said, “English is required more in the university than the school.” This was a typical comment made by many of the students, who had moved quite suddenly from a primarily Arabic speaking environment at the secondary school, to an essentially English only environment at the university.

Students also commented on the predominance of native speaking teachers at the university in comparison to secondary school. For example, one student stated, “because in the university the teacher is native and has a high degree, but in the school he is a learner like us”. Students’ comments indicated that their perceptions of the relative competencies and qualifications were different, with the university teachers identified as being better qualified, and were native speakers, while the secondary teachers were merely learners of English because they were non-native.

These findings reflect the realities of the UAE’s education system, which is characterized by the presence of two main education authorities, one which controls primary and secondary education, and the other controlling the tertiary sector. Findlow highlights the realities of state education as implying that

“throughout childhood, Arabic supplies all or most communication needs, while the transition at age 18 to learning in English requires a substantially changed cultural mindset requires a substantially changed cultural mindset. In the UAE, the traditionalist, largely Egyptian- run ‘Ministry of Education and Youth’ produces most of its literature in Arabic, and emphasizes the importance of fostering Islamic and Arabic culture. The distinct ‘Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research’, which oversees tertiary education, research... operates in English” (Findlow 2006, p. 27)

The school system in the UAE is government run and the predominant language used is Arabic and is taught predominantly by Arab expatriate teachers. The divisions in the control of the state education systems mean that there is a tendency for monolingual EFL teachers to be teaching in the higher education institutions, and the expatriate Arabic
teachers in the primary and secondary school setting. This situation has been described by Karmani (2005) as ‘a grotesque form of ‘linguistic apartheid’’ which is

“based almost entirely around a series of social privileges (e.g. native speaker privilege, White privilege, American privilege, British privilege, etc.) whereon the one hand a community of largely white, Western, “native-speakers” of English is employed in the lucrative tertiary sector and the other is the vast number of bilingual Arab teachers of English who work in the substantially underinvested secondary and primary school systems.” (Karmani 2005, p. 94).

These realities reflected the findings of the study which indicated that teachers in the secondary setting were predominantly native Arabic speakers. Blame for low levels of attainment in English has often been blamed on the expatriate Arabic teachers’ use of Arabic in the classroom, including by students and the tertiary education system. However, this assumption ignores other fundamental factors including lack of funding provided to the primary and secondary schooling sectors, and differences in the managements of the two sectors of education.

**ii) Students’ perceptions of the role of L1 in the EFL classroom**

Questions 1, 2, 8 and 9 addressed students’ perceptions of the role of L1 in the classroom. In question 1, where students were asked if they believed that Arabic helped them to learn English, a significant difference between the Level 1 (n=2.05) and Level 2 (n=3.13) was found, and also a significant difference between level 1(n=2.05) and level 3 (n=3.03). The independent T- test showed a significant difference (sig. 2-tailed less than 0.01). In other words, a higher proportion of lower level students indicated that more students believed that Arabic in the classroom helped them to learn English.

When students were asked whether they supported teacher use of Arabic in the English classroom, the level 1 students’ mean was 2.38, level 2 was 2.93, and level 3 was 3.11, which again indicated that lower level students supported more Arabic use by teachers in
comparison to the higher levels. For instance, one level 3 students made the following comment:

“I disagree with talking in Arabic English classes because we came to the university to improve our English, but in secondary school we still learn and the technique is different”.

Question 8 asked students to rate the percentage of time teachers should spend using Arabic in the English classroom, with choices from 0% to more than 50%. In a similar vein to the responses of the two previously mentioned question, the level 1 students (mean: 3.67) demonstrated a higher preference for Arabic use in comparison to level 2 (3.07) and 3 (2.79).

Question 9 was an open-ended question, and various comments were written by students, with level three students’ comments demonstrating less support of Arabic use in the classroom. For example, a level three student responded “I feel like I am in Arabic class and to use Arabic will not help us to learn English”, while a typical level 1 response was the following: “Easily describe what I want to talk about and understand what the teacher wants”. The students at the higher levels were more aware of the potential pitfalls of L1 use in the classroom, which were reflected in their responses.

**iii) Exploring Administration’s English only policy**

The head of the tertiary EFL program was interviewed about the policy of the department towards the use of Arabic and the rationales for this policy. The policy for the use of L1 was that it was expected that teachers exclusively used English in the classroom, which had been enforced a few years prior. Teachers were unofficially aware of the policy of the institution and the students had the power to complain to administration about teachers’ use of L1 in the EFL classroom. Prior to 2007, the student evaluation of instructors form asked students to comment about the instructors’ use of Arabic, but more recently, this question has been omitted from the document.
The English only policy was rationalized through the following response:

“It stems from the history of this place. Students in the public school system spent a few years struggling with English and the vast majority of the teachers come from the Middle East. The teachers’ inadequate training and the main problem is that they use a lot of Arabic in the classroom.”

In other words, the administration’s main rationale for excluding the use of L1 was based on secondary school teachers’ over-reliance on the L1 in teaching English, which was considered to be one of the underlying reasons for students’ low proficiency in English when they had reached the tertiary level. This was the main rationale for the policy, with the program head acknowledging that the administration’s concern about the potential over-use of L1 in EFL learning, which would be a hindrance to students’ learning overrode consideration for educational research findings related to this issue.

“The university made that decision thinking that the use of L1 in the classroom is bad because of the frustration with the experience in the primary and secondary school. This frustration has resulted in them making such decisions that can be extreme without thinking about the pedagogic implications so it’s not the linguist or applied linguist who has decreed this but it’s the local administration who believe that Arabic is the problem.”

Thus the English only policy of the university and the over-use of the Arabic in the school demonstrates Auerbach’s ‘all or nothing’ approach to the use of L1 in the EFL classroom, who asserts that because ‘the grammar-translation method has been widely discredited and concurrent translation shown to be ineffective, no alternative except the complete exclusion of the L1 in the ESL classroom is seen as valid” (p. 15). These two
extreme positions towards the potential role of L1 either undermine English language acquisition, or deny the use of an important linguistic resource for language learning.

**Reflection and Conclusion**

Despite the obvious limitations of the study, including the relatively small sample of respondents, which only reflects the experiences of students from one tertiary EFL institution, there are some salient findings that can be drawn from the research. The most important finding for teachers and for administrative bodies of EFL institutions is that lower level students’ higher demand for L1 use indicates a need to sensibly incorporate this pedagogical tool for learning particularly at the lower levels. Students in the study were generally able to identify the relative importance of L1 based on their own specific learning needs. The finding that lower level students who were more likely to support L1 use as a scaffolding tool indicated that students identified this as an important part of effective learning.

Atkinson (1987) recommends a ‘profitable’ use of only 5% L1 in the EFL classroom. If fostering autonomous learners is one of the aims of the tertiary institutions, consideration for students’ perceptions of their learning needs should be taken into account when pedagogical decisions are made on their behalf. Rather than being only an administration policy, students’ opinions regarding this pedagogical tool should also be taken into account in a collaborative decision making process. Teachers should encourage critical reflection and discussion around the role of L1 in EFL learning, a process which is encouraged by Auerbach (1993) and Mee-ling (1996).

Another secondary finding that emerged from the findings was the secondary school’s reliance on the L1 to teach English. Although the literature supports the use of L1, various researchers have warned of the detrimental effects of over-using the L1 in EFL (Wilkins 1974, Atkinson 1987). Mai-ling’s (1996) into the L1 use of English teachers who native speakers of Cantonese who taught a group of students with the same linguistic
background, highlighted that teachers needed to ensure that there was critical reflection around the ‘sensible’ use of L1 in the EFL classroom. Mai-ling (1996) concludes:

‘Speaking English in class with little regard to whether the students understand or not will result only in “meaningless exposure’. On the other hand, using Cantonese arbitrarily will easily lead to the overuse of it, which is equally harmful to language learning. It would perhaps be ‘profitable’ if teachers could use Cantonese sensibly as an effective supplementary teaching medium, but not as a float that they grasp for survival” (p. 98).

These findings entail implications both for the secondary school which seem to have over-used L1 to what some believe is the detriment of the students’ learning, and for the tertiary EFL sector which has completely banished L1 use from their program. Secondary schools need to critically reflect upon sensible uses of the L1 which need to be limited to amounts which do not deprive students of L2 exposure. Perhaps more funding of curriculum and professional development for teachers at the primary and secondary level could minimize this problem. This issue may be addressed with current measures by the ministry of education to develop and implement new curricular measures to improve the English language teaching in the schools, which has included ‘an evaluation of the objectives, methodology, materials, assessment, and teacher qualifications and evaluation” (Troudi 2007, p.7).

On the other hand, tertiary EFL institutions need to accept the need for and adopt a more realistic policy for L1 use. For the EFL programs, a more accommodating policy of L1 use, particularly for the low level learners would ease the transition for the students into the tertiary setting which requires them to adapt to a very different culture of learning to the one they left behind in the secondary school. The current shift from Arabic medium to one of no Arabic at all is very abrupt and causes high levels of anxiety and contributes to higher rates of academic failure with many students, as it fails to take into consideration the background and learning experiences of the students. The first step in getting tertiary EFL institutions to reflect upon this policy of total exclusion of L1, is to raise awareness of the issue and provide the stakeholders, particularly teachers and administration with a
context in which to discuss this issue. To initiate this process, I posted a discussion question in the tertiary institution’s online discussion board. A tertiary teacher who is not a native speaker of Arabic added her thoughts on a discussion board:

“I think there are some positive reasons for using Arabic (L1) in an English (L2) learning classroom. However, I also think unless used very deliberately and/or for very specific purposes, (e.g. a word or concept that just isn't easily translated), then the L1 can be over-used and consequently the student(s) denied the struggle they very much need to really learn and eventually acquire English”.

One way to do this would be to adopt a transition phase to overcome this issue for students by discouraging the over-reliance upon L1 in the secondary school level, and also by assigning bilingual teachers to lower level classes at the tertiary level. This would also reduce levels of anxiety and provide much needed scaffolding with new cognitively demanding tasks such as academic writing.

Much needed research around this pedagogical issue is some systematic action research studies through audio-recording of teacher talk and student discussions during collaborative peer work, which can determine effective or ineffective L1 use. Similar studies have been conducted, but not at systematic level, and not in the Middle Eastern / Arabian Gulf context.
References


