

An Analysis of Algerian Learners and Teachers' Beliefs and Use of Mother Tongue in EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

The focus of this study is to describe, explore, and analyze Algerian secondary school learners and teachers' beliefs and use of the mother tongue, Algerian Arabic, in the EFL classroom. It also aims at identifying the amount and situations where the use of L1 is needed or avoided. In order to meet these objectives, data were collected from 138 secondary school pupils and three teachers using questionnaires to learners, interview to teachers, and observation of teachers in their classrooms. The findings reveal that both learners and teachers favor the use of L1 in specific situations and view L1 as an aid for overcoming language difficulties, checking learners' understanding and clarifying ambiguities.

Although the learners believe that L1 should not be used for giving instructions or explaining English grammar because these should be done in L2 to maximize target language learning, they agree that the mother tongue should not be completely excluded from the foreign language classroom because it can facilitate comprehension and provides them with a sense of belonging. L1 also creates a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. Forbidding the use of L2 in the L2 classroom may create frustrations and prevent learners from successful achievements. The findings of the study would imply that the mother tongue is inevitable in a foreign language context where both learners and teachers speak the same language and share the same cultural background and is a valuable teaching strategy for successful learning.

Key words:

L1 (Mother tongue/ First language), L2 (English), secondary school learners.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Throughout history, a number of language teaching and learning methods have dealt with the controversial and hotly debated issue of whether or not to use the learner's mother tongue in the foreign language classroom. Two different approaches to the use of the mother tongue (L1) in EFL classes have stood out from this debate: (a) L1 should be used in EFL classes because it reduces anxiety and helps learners learn better (Auerbach, 1993) and (b) the use of L1 should be avoided on the grounds that the more learners are exposed to the target language, the better their performance in the target language will be (Ellis, 2005). Therefore, the issue is whether EFL teachers should adopt a monolingual approach or a bilingual approach to teach English.

During my experience of over twenty years teaching English in Algerian public secondary schools, I have adopted different approaches and methods in my teaching practice and I often found myself in situations which imposed the use of L1 to increase my learners' understanding. I often noticed that the use of the learners' mother tongue, Algerian Arabic, which is also my mother tongue, was a great opportunity to raise their awareness of cross-linguistic comparisons between English and Arabic and to open interesting discussions on cross-cultural issues. It is uncontroversial that the best way to learn a foreign language is by being exposed to it most of the time without any interference of the mother tongue, but cross-linguistic comparisons can be quite beneficial to learners who have difficulties learning the target language and understanding the target culture.

The aim of this study is to describe learners and teachers' use of the mother tongue in EFL classes, as well as explore their views about using L1 to learn L2. It is an attempt to find answers to the following questions:

- 1-When and how frequently do learners use their mother tongue in English classes?
- 2-What do they think about using the mother tongue in English classes?
- 3-In what situations do teachers use the mother tongue?
- 4-What do they think about using the mother tongue in English classes?

Socio-Linguistic Context of the Study

The study takes place in a multilingual context as Algeria can be described as a multilingual country owing to the many languages spoken by its speakers. Three languages prevail in this country: Arabic, Tamazight or Berber and French. Arabic is divided into formal Arabic and informal or Algerian Arabic, also called Deridja. Formal Arabic is called Classical (or Standard Arabic). It is the language of the Quran and it is common to all Arab countries. This variety of Arabic is used in formal situations (the media, school, official discourse, etc) but not in everyday life or at home. Formal Arabic has been recognized by the Algerian Constitution as the official language of the country since 1963.

Algerian Arabic, or Deridja, on the other hand, is a multitude of geographically defined forms of Arabic. It is a variety derived from the formal Arabic language and is used in informal situations. Tamazight or Berber is also a language which has its own regional dialects and different varieties. It is the second official language of Algeria, after Standard Arabic. Algerian Arabic and Tamazight or Berber are the two mother tongues of a large majority of the population.

French has a significant role in the Algerian society too and it is employed by many people in their social and everyday life. The French language has imposed its sociolinguistic features on Algerian Arabic through code-switching and borrowing. French stands as the first foreign language of Algeria and is taught at primary school, while English stands as the second foreign language and is taught as a mandatory subject, in middle and secondary schools, and at university. Other second foreign languages such as Spanish, German, or Italian, are also taught in secondary schools.

For the purpose of the present research, and because it was undertaken in Algiers, the expression 'mother tongue' refers to Algerian Arabic, or Deridja, and is used by all the participants in this study.

A number of studies have stressed the benefits of using the mother tongue when learning a foreign language. These benefits have always been supported by arguments which are linguistic/psycholinguistic, semantic, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural, and economical, as described below:

Linguistic /psycholinguistic argument: proponents of the mother tongue advocate the necessity of using L1 in EFL classrooms because learners are already equipped with a language system, a system that makes them more linguistically developed and increases their sense of security. Sweet (1964: 193) already stated that "...the first preparation for the study of a foreign language is the acquisition of a thorough knowledge of the peculiarities of one's own language". The two language systems

(mother tongue and target language) are interwoven in that “every idea is indissolubly associated with some words or phrases in our language system” (Sweet, 1964:199). This was also the position of Del Mar et al (1982) who claimed that learners often try to ‘equate’ the structure or lexical item of the target language with its ‘closest’ correlate in the mother tongue. Therefore, teachers and learners’ ability to transfer between mother tongue and the foreign language is, in fact, a natural psycho-linguistic process. One cannot ignore the presence of two language systems in the mind of a language learner: the influence of one language on the other is constantly present either consciously or unconsciously.

Semantic argument: using L1 enables students to easily grasp the meaning of words and clarify ambiguity. L1 is typically used to explain “unfamiliar things to each other in a more familiar way” (Florez, 2000:5)

Emotional argument: the use of L1 provides learners with a ‘sense of security’. L1 lowers anxiety levels and reduces the affective barriers to L2 learning. It also permits learners to express themselves easily and freely. The use of L1 in language classrooms is a good psychological support for learners and should not be prohibited. (Auerback ,1993; Emenanjo 1990).

Cognitive argument: L1 serves as a ‘scaffolding tool’ helping students to a high performance in L2. And as speaking is a ‘cognitive tool’ that learners can use to talk about a given task and how to complete it, the use of the mother tongue makes them gain control of the situation, plan, organize and coordinate their actions and the actions of others (Alegria de la Coline & Del Pilar Garcia Maya, 2009). This view was also defended by Storch and Wigglessworth, who stated that the use of L1 “may provide learners with additional cognitive support that allow them to analyze language and work at a higher level than would be” (2003: 760)

Social argument: with the help of L1, learners are highly motivated to learn the foreign language and feel more confident at discussing the different ways of developing strategies to accomplish it successfully (Anton & Decamilla, 1998). On the importance of L1, Florez (2000:5) added that we use it “to commiserate, complain and share frustrating or fighting experience with a new language and culture”.

Cultural argument: L1 helps in shedding light on the cultural similarities and differences between the target language and the mother tongue. Indeed, L1 is part of learners' culture and by providing learners with many activities involving the use of L1, learners will preserve their cultural identity and at the same time learn to accept the difference(s) between their mother tongue and the target language they are learning. Therefore, adapting a bilingual approach "permits for language and culture shock to be alleviated" (Hemmindinger, 1987 cited in Auerbach, 1993:8)

Economical argument: instead of going through a 'long explanation' of structures and items in the target language, it may be more appropriate and more efficient to use students' mother tongue. This may save class time. Piasecka (1988:97) insisted on the fact that:

'Teaching bilingually' is not at all a return to the Grammar Translation Method but rather a standpoint which accepts that the thinking, feeling, and artistic life of a person is very much rooted in their mother tongue (...) we need to speak in order to sort out our ideas, and when learning a new language this is often best done through the mother tongue.

According to Deller and Rinvoluceri (2002:3), "The mother tongue taboo has been with us for a long time, but fortunately now things seem to be changing. I believe that many teachers have continued to use the mother tongue because it is both necessary and effective". As a matter of fact, the mother tongue is often used by language learners because it is a "learner-preferred strategy" (Atkinson, 1987:422), as the present study demonstrates.

Students and Teachers' Beliefs about the Use of L1 in L2 Teaching/Learning

A number of studies have been carried out in different parts of the world, both at school and university levels, to examine learners and teachers' beliefs about using the mother tongue in EFL classrooms and to find out to what extent the use of L1 can be effective. Most of the studies used questionnaires, interviews or observations.

Horwitz (1985) conducted a study with German and Spanish students learning English and found that the majority of them approved the idea of using translation in ESL/ EFL classes. Likewise, Kharmas and Hajjaj (1989) investigated the use of the mother tongue in the classroom and found out that teachers and students favor to a great extent the use of the mother tongue as a learning strategy, but they advocated a limited use of it. Sharma (2006) also undertook a study with 100 high school students and 20 teachers in Nepal using a questionnaire and classroom observation.

The study revealed that both teachers and learners prefer a limited use of L1 in EFL classes.

A research study undertaken by Schweers (1999) at a Puerto Rican university with Spanish students learning English revealed that the majority of the participants think the use of Spanish should be allowed in the English classroom. This goes in line with Hsieh (2000)'s findings which showed that translation helped Taiwanese students improve their reading comprehension and understand better new vocabulary. Aqel (2006) conducted a study with Arab students of English and non-native teachers of English at the University of Qatar in order to find out learners and teachers' perceptions of using the mother tongue (Arabic) in the English classroom through administering a questionnaire. The study revealed that both students and instructors found it acceptable to use Arabic in teaching the target language.

Other empirical studies demonstrated that the use of L1 to teach L2 increased the students' English repertoire and improved their language skills namely reading, writing and speaking (Liao ,2006; Prince,1996). Al- Hadhrami (2008) conducted a study with Arab learners learning English as a foreign language in Oman. He used interview and classroom observation to collect data. He found that teachers used Arabic to translate new words and concepts. But Arabic was also used to give instructions. Likewise, Cianflone (2009) conducted a research with Italian native speakers learning English as a foreign language. Both students and their teachers agreed that L1 should be used to explain difficult grammar or vocabulary items because this could save time and motivate students.

Alegria de la Colina and Del Pilar Garcia (2009) conducted a study with 12 EFL students and found out that L1 was used as a cognitive tool to understand better the meaning of new words and retain them. Besides, L1 was found to allow students to interact and helped them gain control of the learning material. Bouanguene (2009) conducted a case study at the University of Laos and argued that "in order to prevent misunderstanding of the meaning of a new word, teachers should provide clear, simple and brief explanations of meaning, especially in the learners' first language" (2009:189).

Thus, the literature stresses the fact that L1 can be used as a learning strategy, as a scaffolding for the learners' comprehension of the target language (Chamot et al 1987), or as a helping strategy (Karimian 2013). The use of L1 increases self-confidence and the total exclusion of the mother tongue from the L2 classroom can make learners feel nervous and lose confidence (Wenden 1986; Hussain 1996). It is clear that the learner's first language is an important pedagogical resource that cannot be neglected. However, it should not be overused in order to increase the learner's exposure to the target language.

1. Method

The present investigation is a case study using a mixed methods approach which combines qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Data were collected at Rabah Bitat and Mohamed Hajras secondary schools four years ago. Both schools are located in Algiers. The sample is made of 138 pupils divided into 48 first year pupils (sciences stream), 46 second year pupils (mathematics stream) and 44 third year pupils (foreign languages stream). Three English language teachers from two different secondary schools also participated in the study. In order to collect the data and meet the objectives of the study, three research instruments were used:

- A close ended-questionnaire administered to the both learners and teachers to collect data on the situations when L1 is resorted to by learners and teachers.
- A semi-structured interview to the three teachers to gather data on the situations when L1 is used as a teaching aid and on their beliefs or opinions on the use of L1 in L2 classes.
- Classroom observation to identify the situations when teachers resort to the use of L1. Each teacher was observed for 90 minutes. The number of times each teacher used Algerian Arabic during the lesson, was recorded on a checklist.

The questionnaires items, the semi structured interview and the observation checklist were adapted from Jabak (2012), Al-Nofaie (2010), Al Sharaeai (2012), and Brenkova and Vojtková (2007).

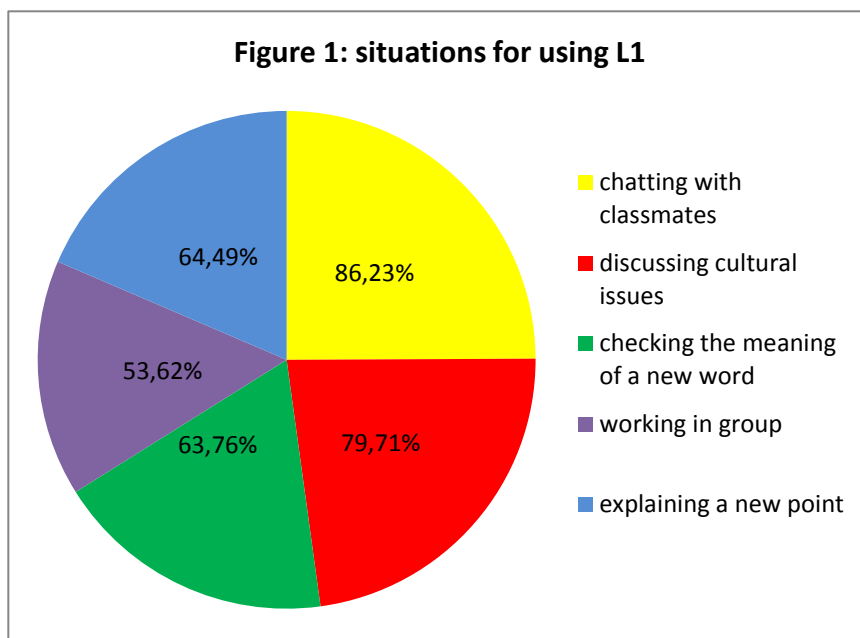
2. Results

This section focuses on the results obtained from the data analysis of the questionnaire, the interview and the observation.

▪ *When and how frequently do learners use their mother tongue in English classes?*

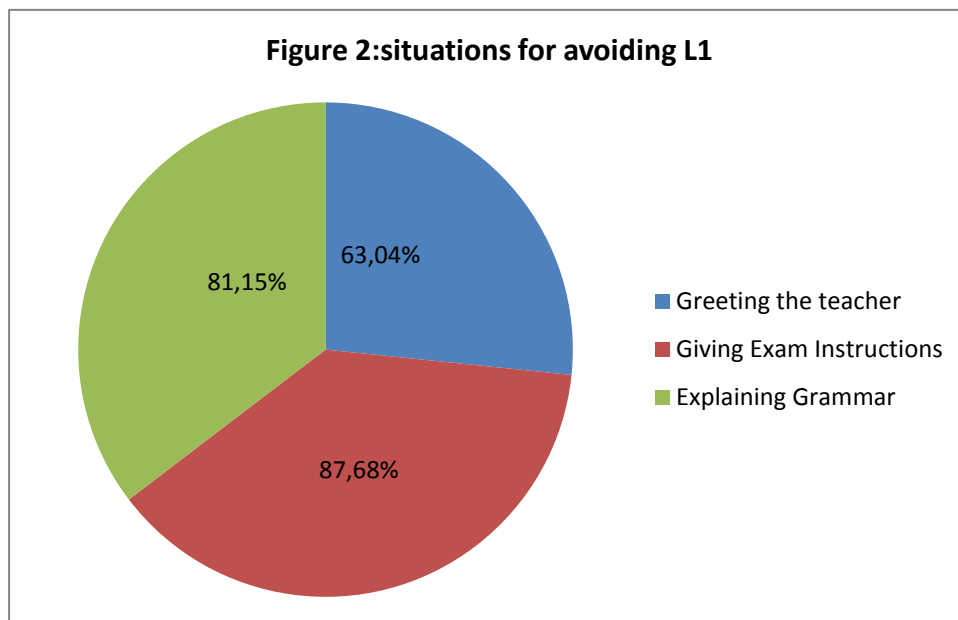
The statistical analysis of the data shows that the learners' use of their L1 in the following situations, as described in figure 1 below:

- Chatting with classmates: 86.23%
- Discussing cultural issues: 79.71%
- Checking the meaning of a new word: 63.76%
- Explaining a new point: 64.49%
- Working in group 53.62%



As for the situations where L1 should not be used and for which the pupils of the three class levels (first, second and third year of the secondary school) prefer the use of English, the results are as follows (see Figure 2 below):

- Giving exam instructions: 87.68%
- Explaining grammar: 81.15%
- Greeting the teacher : 63.04%



▪ ***What do learners think about using the mother tongue in English classes?***

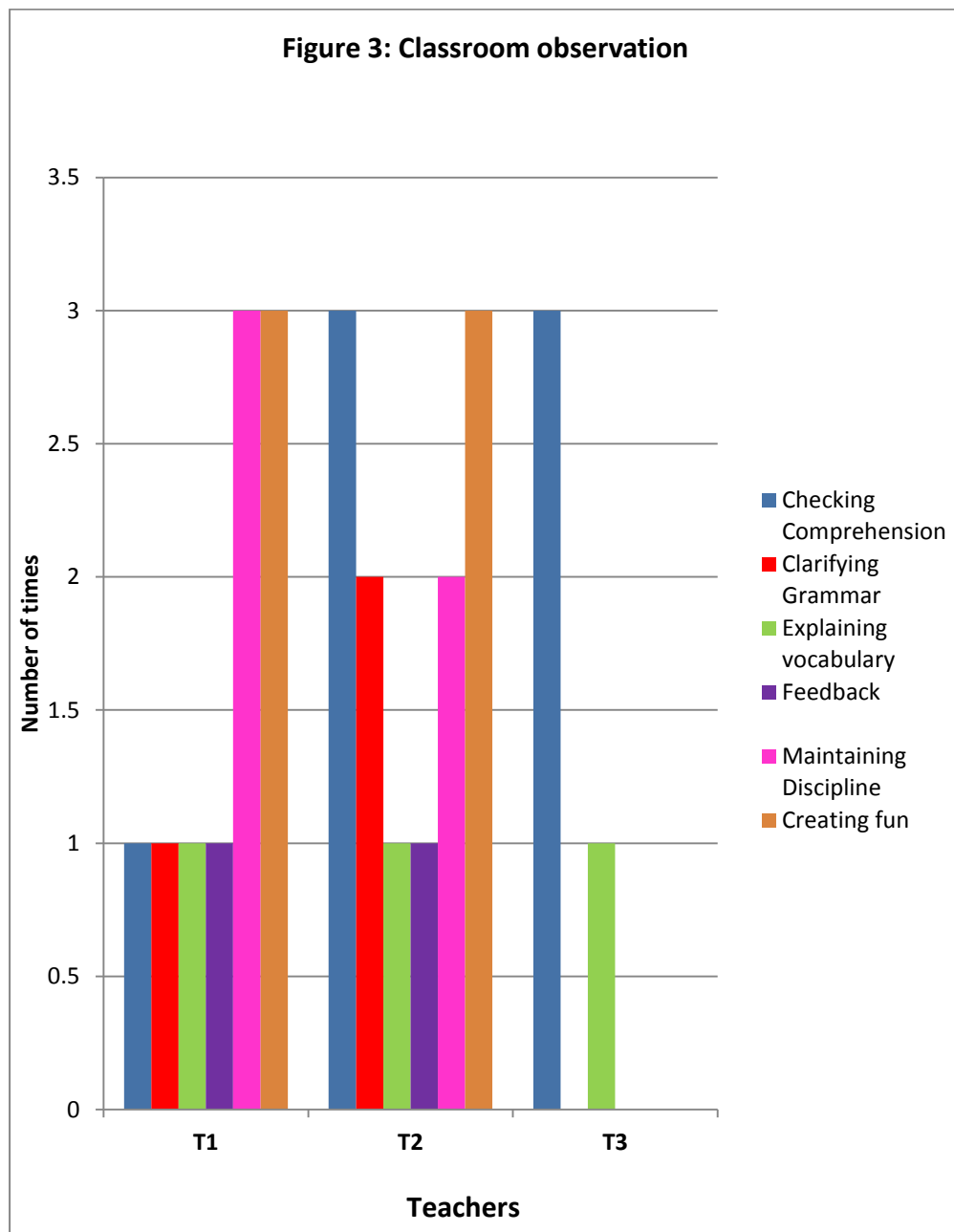
The responses to the questionnaire revealed that learners have a positive opinion towards L1 use and that Algerian Arabic, their mother tongue, is crucial for their understanding of the target language and for progressing in it. For the majority of learners, L1 is necessary for understanding and comparing the linguistic systems of Arabic and English, for explaining and illustrating the meaning of difficult vocabulary and for comparing some grammatical items and structures. L1 seems to increase motivation and to break the psychological barriers between learners and teachers. However, the majority of the learners are aware that a large amount of exposure to English is necessary and is the only key to achieve high quality outcomes.

▪ ***In what situations do teachers use the mother tongue in English classes ?***

The three teachers were observed in their classes using a pre-determined check-list of items. The different situations of L1 use by the three teachers are as follows:

- Checking comprehension:
- Clarifying grammar:
- Explaining vocabulary:
- Feedback:

They are illustrated in Figure 3 below.



The observation of teacher 3 reveals that she is more aware of the threat of overusing the mother tongue in EFL classroom. Teacher 3 used Algerian Arabic less than teacher 1 and teacher 2. Her use is limited to checking comprehension (3 times) and explaining difficult words (twice). On the flip side, Teacher 1 used Algerian Arabic to create fun (3 times), maintain discipline (3 times), check comprehension (one time), clarify grammar (one time), explain vocabulary (one time) and give feedback (one time), and teacher 2 used the mother tongue to check comprehension (3 times), clarify grammar (twice), explain vocabulary (one time), feedback (one time), maintain discipline (twice) and create fun (3 times).

What do teachers think about using the mother tongue in English classes?

The teachers' responses to the semi-structured interview revealed that the use of L1 should not be excluded from the language classroom because it supports their teaching and creates a non-threatening environment. They also believe that L1 is an effective means to increase learners' motivation, and a vital tool for teaching a foreign language. The three teachers agree that the level of their learners affects the amount of L1 use in the classroom. Moreover, the three teachers are found to believe that the use of the mother tongue cannot be a sign of less creative teaching, especially when language teachers use the mother tongue purposefully and judiciously. They also agree unanimously that the use of L1 makes them feel comfortable and not blamable as long as it is used judiciously.

4. Discussion

It is interesting to note that the use of L1 by secondary school learners is quite strategic. They tend to employ Algerian Arabic as follows:

- as a **social strategy** when interacting with each other, when working in groups or when chatting with their classmates
- as a **cognitive strategy** to check the meaning of new words, in a bilingual dictionary for instance.
- as a **metacognitive strategy** to deepen or increase their understanding of language or cultural issues. For instance, L1 may be used to clear incorrect comprehension of the language and culture of English-speaking people.

However, it is interesting to mention that learners prefer to receive examination instructions in English, to have grammar explained in English, and also to greet the teacher in English. These are the situations for which they prefer to avoid the use of L1. But the reasons for avoiding the mother tongue and preferring L2 were not explained by the learners.

With respect to the use of L1, the mother tongue by the three teachers of English, the observation of their lessons revealed that Algerian Arabic was widely employed as a teaching strategy: to check learners' comprehension, to clarify a grammar point, to explain vocabulary and to provide feedback. But it is worth to underline, at this point, that the pupils preferred to receive the teacher's exam instructions in English, and the explanation of a grammar point in English too. The teachers' views are clearly divergent from those of the learners and further research is needed to understand this divergence.

It seems that the use of L1 by the teachers is quite flexible: they were willing to use the mother tongue during the lesson whenever the learners failed to understand a point, and above all, they wanted to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the classroom to reduce the learners' anxiety.

The findings of this small-scale study support the view that the mother tongue is a useful cognitive, social, affective, and linguistic tool for teaching, but it should be kept to a minimum of use. From the teachers' point of view, the use of the mother tongue cannot be avoided to explain difficult or confusing points of grammar or vocabulary, but from the learners' perspective, the mother tongue should not be used for giving instructions on an examination task, or explaining a grammar lesson or when greeting the teacher since in all these situations, English should be used. As noted earlier, the teachers and learners' opinions diverge on the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. Deller and Rinvoluceri (2002:10) describe the mother tongue as "the mother of all the other languages learned by the students. It is through the mother tongue that the other languages are born in the learners' mind". But they did not specify in what situations the mother tongue should be used.

Overall, teachers' opinions are in line with Atkinson (1987) who states that the use of L1 aids language learners in their learning process. Butzkamm (2003) advocated the use of L1 to assist learners at the psychological level by helping them to be 'stress-free'. The present findings also corroborate with those of Chamot et al (1987), Horwitz (1988), Kharm & Hajjaj (1989), Schweers (1999), Aqel (2006) and Cianflone (2009) who demonstrated that the presence of the learner's mother tongue is inevitable in the EFL context.

It is worth mentioning that making decisions about L1 use in EFL context is not an easy issue. It seems to be complex and contradictory. Needless to say that 'teaching a learner without his native language not only disregards his or her identity and culture but also turns him or her into new born baby with an adult mind' (Yavuz, 2012:4343). The use of L1 helps learners get more involved in the learning process and this suggests that the mother tongue is constantly present in language teaching. Hence, the need for this presence cannot be denied. Teachers in the present study agree with Gabrielatos (2001) who insists that L1 should not be treated as a 'sin'.

The responses to the four research questions reveal that both learners and teachers report positive beliefs about L1 use and rely upon the mother tongue use in the language classroom. They seem to be quite aware of the threat of extensively using L1 and therefore do not want to be dependent on it. This is why, they believe in the necessity of incorporating a limited L1 use in L2 learning to increase the comprehension rate and ensure learning. This belief goes in line with Atkinson (1987) who states that the use of learners' mother tongue must be minimized.

3. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to report a study conducted on the use of the mother tongue, Algerian Arabic, in the EFL classroom. The study attempted to identify the amount of L1 use and the situations where the use of L1 was needed or avoided, from the perspective of both learners and teachers. In order to meet these objectives, data were collected from 138 secondary school pupils and three teachers using questionnaires to learners, semi-structured interview to teachers, and observation of teachers in their classes. The findings revealed that both learners and teachers favor the use of L1 in some specific situations and believe L1 to be an aid for overcoming the language difficulties of the learners, checking their understanding and clarifying ambiguities. Although the learners believed that L1 should not be used for giving instructions or explaining grammar, because these should be done in L2, probably to maximize target language learning, they agreed that the mother tongue should not be completely excluded from the foreign language classroom because it can facilitate comprehension and provide learners with a sense of belonging. According to the teachers, L1 is necessary to create a relaxed, stress-free, non-threatening and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom, and forbidding its use may create frustrations and prevent learners from successful achievements. The findings of the study would imply that the mother tongue is inevitable in a foreign language context where both learners and teachers speak the same language

and share the same cultural background. Then, L1 becomes a valuable asset to overcome linguistic and cultural misunderstandings.

Based on the findings of the research which unveil the handful situations that needs the mother tongue use in EFL classroom and reveal the learners and teachers' attitudes and opinions on the issue, a set of recommendations are suggestions for future research are presented:

1-Teachers need to be aware that anxiety is the first obstacle in learning a foreign language and therefore should avoid obliging learners to use only English to express themselves. It is the task of the language teachers to remove all psychological obstacles

2- Teachers are also recommended to allow their learners to use their mother tongue when interacting with their peers in order to help them preserve their social and cultural identity.

3- The ministry of education along with secondary school curriculum designers should reflect on making translation reference at the end of the learners' text book where EFL learners can find all the difficult words (that are supposed to be dealt with throughout the academic year) translated into their L1.

4-Further research investigating the actual use of L1 by both learners and teachers can be undertaken by using other sources for collecting data such as: diaries and think aloud procedure.

5- Further studies should be undertaken in order to examine the relationship between L1 and learners' motivation on the one hand, and between using the mother tongue and improving the learners' language proficiency on the other hand. Such studies will definitely help curriculum designers propose guidelines for both language teachers and secondary school learners on how to make use of L1 in an effective way along with suggesting interesting activities aiming at providing opportunities for learners to develop their communicative skill.

6- Further studies are needed to investigate and find out the appropriate amount of time that should be devoted to L1 in EFL classroom.

7-Finally, more studies are needed in private secondary schools where learners are exposed to many hours of English sessions. Such studies will help us determine if there is a relationship between language proficiency and the use of the mother tongue knowing that learners who studied in private schools have a large experience in learning English. Indeed, they start learning the target language in primary school

which makes them more advanced in terms of language acquisition than those who studied in public schools where English is learned in middle school and not before.

To conclude, the insights stemming from the present study make the researcher share the opinion of Harbord who states that “this is not a call for extensive L1 use... but rather a justification for its limited use in certain situation (1992: 351).

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