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## Teachers of English as a Foreign Language and their Use of Students' First Language in Teaching Grammar

Abdussalam Tantani

Department of English - Faculty of Arts- University of Zawia  
Zawia- Libya

Email: [A.tantani@zu.edu.ly](mailto:A.tantani@zu.edu.ly)

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching English grammar is a challenging task for certain EFL teachers. The previous studies show that one of the solutions to this issue is to encourage teachers to use students' L1 in grammar classes. Therefore, this paper aims to review the literature to know to what extent EFL teachers may use their students' L1 when they teach English grammar. This means also identifying the advantages and disadvantages of using students' L1. A descriptive study was conducted to achieve this goal. The conclusions gained from the literature revealed that using students' first language in second-language grammar classes is still a paradox between researchers in different contexts. Certain researchers with using it and others believe that it is not good for teachers to use the students' L1 when they teach L2 or FL language. On the other hand, other studies have shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2. Thus, this paper suggested solutions for this issue.

**Keywords:** Grammar, First language Second language, Foreign language.



# معلمو اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية واستخدامهم لغة الطلاب الأولى في تدريس مادة القواعد

عبدالسلام الطانطاني

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية - كلية الآداب - جامعة الزاوية - ليبيا

Email: [A.tantani@zu.edu.ly](mailto:A.tantani@zu.edu.ly)

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## ملخص البحث:

يعد تدريس قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية مهمة صعبة لبعض معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تقترح بعض الدراسات السابقة أن أحد الحلول لهذه المشكلة هو تشجيع المعلمين على استخدام اللغة الأولى للطلاب في تدريس مادة القواعد، لذلك، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى مراجعة الأدبيات لمعرفة إلى أي مدى يمكن معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية استخدام اللغة الأولى لطلابهم عند تدريس قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية، وهذا يعني أيضًا تحديد مزايا وعيوب استخدام اللغة الأولى للطلاب، وقد أجريت دراسة وصفية لتحقيق هذا الهدف. حيث كشفت الاستنتاجات المستمدة من الأدبيات أن استخدام اللغة الأولى للطلاب في فصول قواعد اللغة الثانية لا يزال يمثل مفارقة بين الباحثين في سياقات مختلفة، حيث يعتقد بعض الباحثين أنه ليس من الجيد أن يستخدم المعلمون اللغة الأولى للطلاب عندما يقومون بتدريس اللغة الثانية، ومن ناحية أخرى، هناك دراسات ضد استخدامها وأظهرت دراسات أخرى أن المعلمين يمكنهم استخدام لغة الطلاب الأولى فقط عند الضرورة لكي يزيد فهم وتعلم اللغة الثانية، لذلك اقترحت هذه المقالة بعض الحلول لهذه المسألة. الكلمات المفتاحية: قواعد اللغة، اللغة الأولى، اللغة الثانية، اللغة الأجنبية.

## Introduction

Teaching grammar in a foreign context can be a real challenge for teachers and students alike. Crystal (2004, p.7) defines grammar as “the business of taking a language to pieces, to see how it works”. Bruen, and Kelly (2014) mention that many might support this view of grammar as “the underlying knowledge of the system of rules, which speakers apply to form correct sentences in spoken and written production” (p. 258). In this regard, it is important because the knowledge of grammatical rules helps students to use the language however, it is difficult for them to transfer their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use (Tantani, 2012). Thus, this paper investigates the EFL teachers’ use of the students’ L1 in teaching English grammar in different contexts.

## 1. Studies With Using Students L1 in Teaching English Grammar

The literature shows certain researchers such as Ellis (1997) believe students who are exposed to a second language, gain more input. However, some appropriate use of L1 does facilitate a student's learning of grammar, rather than interfering with it. If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different than one, one could expect a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in the second language. Moreover, students reduce their anxiety, and it creates a more relaxing learning environment (Auerbach, 1993; Burden, 2000). It also may facilitate the task of explaining the meaning of abstract words and introducing the differences between the L1 and L2 in terms of pronunciation and grammar (Buckmaster, 2000). Thus, indicating some interference by the first language on the second language is important in grammar classes.

Auerbach (1993, p. 1) mentions that the “use of students” linguistic resources can be beneficial at all levels of ESL”. The linguists such as Hawks (2001) who support first language use are keen to point out that choosing to use the mother tongue should not be simply to make things easier. Atkinson (1987, p. 241) lists appropriate uses of L1 in the L2 classroom. Moreover, Auerbach (1993) suggests the following possible cases for using the mother tongue: negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson; record keeping; classroom management; scene-setting; language analysis; presentation of rules governing grammar, phonology, morphology, and spelling; discussion of cross-cultural issues; instructions or prompts; explanation of errors, and assessment of comprehension. Inal and Turhanlı (2019) also argue that EFL teachers can also use students’ L1 to facilitate function as they think. It is better to be used for lower-level students for different purposes including teaching grammar, solving disciplinary problems, or explaining differences between L1 and L2.

In addition, certain researchers pointed out the benefits of using the first language of students in the English classroom. Auerbach (1993) argues that it reduces students’ anxiety, and through the researchers’ experience of teaching English, he has found that Libyan students prefer 64 lessons to be explained in the Arabic language as it makes them feel more comfortable in class. Others have found that it creates a more relaxing learning environment (Burden, 2000). It facilitates the task of explaining the meaning of abstract words and introduces the main differences between the L1 and L2 in terms of grammar and pronunciation (Buckmaster, 2000). Moreover, using students’ L1 helps teachers

to check their students' understanding and to give instructions to their students (Atkinson, 1987).

Another study conducted by Hoff (2013) found that L1 is used paradoxically due to teacher proficiency and competence. The findings reveal that the teachers were unable to use English, and they have negative attitudes toward using L1/L2 in English classes. She also found more extensive use of L1 in lower secondary school than in upper secondary school. Therefore, she suggested that teachers should use the concept of comprehensible input as a foundation in facilitative language learning which might contribute to the overuse of L1 in English grammar instruction. Moreover, Timuçin and Baytar (2015) argue that it is beneficial when teachers use their students' L1 to explain grammar, give instructions, check comprehension, manage the class, or for no obvious reason like random code-switching.

Furthermore, Jingxia (2010) argues that using students' L1 is most frequent for the translation of unknown words and explanations of grammar rules that students have difficulty comprehending. Moreover, Berning (2016) states that students achieved better written L2 output than those who relied on the exclusive use of English during collaboration if they were allowed to use their L1 (Japanese) when collaborating on writing tasks. Similarly, results gained by Madrinan (2014) as she saw that learners transferred concepts from their L1. Using students' L1 has several functions ranging from simplifying comprehension and better performance of language skills to facilitating the transfer of previous knowledge to a foreign language. Flognfeldt and Lund (2016) also argue that EFL teachers may use their students' L1 to teach the grammatical aspects. Taking into account that "learners are supposed to be able to adapt their language, they need to be aware of the options available to them" (p. 93). Therefore, teachers need to know when and how to use their students' L1 to understand the target language.

## 2. Studies Against Using Students L1 in Teaching English Grammar

It is still not clear whether or not the teacher should use the learners' L1 in the classroom. This has been made clear by Al-Nofaie (2010: 65), who states that using L1 for teaching a foreign language is a controversial issue among researchers. This is because some teachers "believed that mixing two languages would not help students to reach fluency; therefore, learners should employ their mental abilities to understand the meaning of the new language". On the other

hand, she also argues that other teachers emphasize the importance of L1, especially when introducing unfamiliar items (Howatt, 2004). The reason might be the students “find difficulties in using English for communication” (Rababah, 2003:16). Therefore, some linguists, such as Trumbull (2001) argue that the use of L1 can facilitate the process of teaching grammar and vocabulary, but caution against teachers relying too much on the L1.

Furthermore, teachers and students who use the first language most of the time feel that they are doing something wrong. Phillipson (1992) found that those caught using their first language were often punished or shamed. Those who argue against using the first language say that it does not encourage students to learn the second language; they also argue that students do not get to hear the second language as much as they might if the teacher uses the L1 extensively (Prodromou, 2002; Ellis, 1984, cited in Hawks, 2001). This makes students feel that they are unable to understand the input of the target language until it has been translated into their L1 (Atkinson, 1987).

Moreover, certain researchers believe that it is not good for EFL teachers to use their students' first language when they teach L2 or FL because students do not sufficiently separate the structures and idioms of their first language from the one they are learning. Cook (2001) argues that over the last century, the use of the first language has generally been proscribed in second language teaching. At the extreme, first language use is completely forbidden, and at the least, its use is minimized in second language classes. However, Cook advocates a more positive view, namely maximizing L2 use. He states that as L1 is always present in the user's mind it would be artificial, and sometimes unsuccessful, to avoid its use completely. He also argues that the use of the students' L1 in the classroom does not prevent the students from acquiring the target language. Therefore, EFL teachers should encourage the students to use the target language as much as possible instead of preventing them from using their L1.

In addition, Phillipson (1992) argues that those caught using the first language were often punished or shamed for doing so. Those who argue against using the first language say that it does not encourage students to learn the second language. They further argue that students do not get to hear the second language as much as they might if the teacher uses the L1 extensively (Ellis, 1984, cited in Hawks, 2001; Prodromou, 2002). In Libya, for example, students tend not to try to understand the meaning of a particular task and will wait for their teacher to translate the meaning of new words instead. Students feel that they will be unable to understand until these words have been translated into

their L1 (Atkinson, 1987). It is argued that some appropriate use of L1 surely does facilitate a student's learning rather than interfering with it. If the structures of the two languages are distinct, then one expects a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in the second language due to interference by the first language on the second language (Ellis, 1997).

### 3. Studies With and Against Using Students L1 in Teaching English Grammar

A study conducted by Tantani (2012), found that there is congruence and incongruence between what EFL teachers do and what they say they know about using students' L1 in teaching English grammar, although the teachers were well aware of the benefits and disadvantages of using students' L1 when teaching grammar in the L2 classroom. Tantani's study also revealed that teachers use their students' L1 to explain new words, notice that a student does not understand, check students' understanding, correct students' errors, and move from one activity to another. Furthermore, Fernandez-Guerra, (2014) found that the students had positive attitudes towards the use of their L1 as it can help them to learn the linguistic and cultural issues, improve their comprehension, and increase their motivation. Some other studies revealed that the use of L1 can decrease the level of students' stress in grammar classrooms (Spahiu, 2013).

Furthermore, certain studies have shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of an L2 (Tang, 2002; Wells, 1991). Furthermore, according to one group of researchers, several grammar points can be taught in the target language, especially through the use of physical or visual displays (Pachler & Field, 2001, p. 92). There are occasions when the first language should be used in the classroom, such as when giving instructions or when helping the class to express and check their comprehension of lexical or grammatical forms and meanings. It may be difficult to do this without using the first language, and it saves time that might be wasted trying to enforce a rule prohibiting the use of the first language. Moreover, there is another study conducted by Trumbull (2001), who found that the use of students' L1 can facilitate the process of teaching grammar and vocabulary, but cautions against teachers relying on it too much.

Finally, the literature also shows that using students' L1 in English grammar classes is considered the key factor in minimizing the usage of their L1 is not accepting the students' usage of L1 in cases when they can say it in L2. Therefore, EFL teachers should help students repeat what they have said again

using L2 before moving on (Seligson, 1997). This means L2 or FL should be used as much as possible in grammar classes because it is the only source of exposure to English for the students (Burden, 2001). Moreover, Ellis (2005, p. 8) supports maximizing the use of L2 and being “the medium as well as the object of instruction” in the process of teaching and learning the English language. EFL teachers should reduce using their student's L1 in grammar classes as much as they can. They may use different ways for convenient FL use which might help the teachers to eliminate the use of L1. These methods include using tone of voice, gestures, and demonstration to help students understand instructions better (Willis, 1991).

### Conclusion

This study revealed that there are still disagreements between researchers about using EFL teachers of their students' L1 in grammar classes whether they use only the target language or a combination of the two languages, which is known as code-switching. However, it can be concluded that the best solution for this issue is to let the teachers decide whether they use it or not according to the different situations they deal with. This means that the use of students' L1 by teachers in FL classes is based on the conditions in each particular setting. Moreover, teachers may create appropriate balanced methods of teaching to be used between the two languages in the same class to teach English grammar.

### Implications

- Teaching English grammar needs qualified teachers, good facilities, and students who are highly motivated to learn English. If any of these three principles are missing it will cause a problem in the learning process, and influence students' results at the end of the year.
- EFL teachers should pay attention to the student's abilities, interests, and motivation when they teach English grammar to know when, how, and to what extent to use their students' L1.
- Teachers could use the students' L1 more or less often to correct their students' grammatical errors.
- Teachers of grammar should adopt L1 to move from one activity to another to help low-level students follow them.
- Teachers should use students' L1 to check their understanding if they are forced to.
- Teachers should use students' L1 to explain new words because it works with certain grammar classes.

- EFL teachers should not use students' L1 in grammar classes if the student's level of English is high.
- The literature shows there is a need for more exploration of factors that can affect teachers' classroom practices in teaching English grammar. Therefore, the authority of education should run training sessions for teachers to overcome this issue.

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