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Journal for Research Scholars and Professionals of English Language Teaching

ISSN: 2456-8104 Impact Factor: 6.895 (SJIF)
Vol. 9 | Issue 49 | May 2025 www.jrspelt.com

The Role of Arabic in English Department Classrooms: Exploring Teacher Perspectives and Influencing Factors in Saudi Arabia's Higher Education Contexts

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 Crossref/DOI: https://doi.org/10.54850/jrspelt.9.49.008

Abstract: *The use of L1 in any foreign language educational context is an ongoing controversial topic among educators. Many language teachers believe that the use of L1 can facilitate L2 learning while others remain apprehensive about L1 effect on L2 learning. This research aims to explore English teachers' epistemic and deontic beliefs about the use of Arabic alongside English in tertiary level classrooms in an EFL country, and the factors affecting those beliefs. Epistemic beliefs pertain to the teachers' understanding of knowledge about L1 use, based on experience, while deontic beliefs refer to their sense of obligation concerning its implementation. The stance of their beliefs (with respect to either limiting or exploiting L1) also needs to be considered. Leveraging Activity Theory, the study explores other factors that might influence the adoption of such beliefs, such as teacher teaching experience and educational level, and contextual factors, such as, educational policy. EFL teachers (n= 224) across six tertiary contexts in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia completed a four-point Likert scale response questionnaire. Results indicated that teachers in general endorsed beliefs that were deontic and in favour of limiting L1 rather than those that were epistemic and supporting exploitation of L1. This was interpreted as a possible effect of the Saudi collectivist cultural context. Teacher variables that affected belief were primarily teacher educational level, years of study abroad in an English-speaking country, and years of teaching other subjects through the medium of English. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of L1 in language learning, and can inform teacher training and curriculum design.*

Keywords: Activity Theory, EFL, ELT, ESL, Higher Education, L2 learning, Saudi Arabia, Use of L1

Article History: **Received: 09 April- 2025;** **Accepted: 02 May-2025;** **Published/Available Online: 30 May- 2025**

1. Introduction

The role of L1 in foreign language learning and teaching (especially of English as a foreign language, EFL) has been pursued from many angles over many years, exhibiting great variation in the support for it or the attempt to exclude it. Mostly this has been evidenced in published work by scholars rather than teachers: theorists (e.g. Krashen, 1981; Dodson, 1967), teaching method experts (e.g. summarized by Richards and Rodgers, 2014), and empirical researchers (e.g. summarized by Ellis, 2008; Kerr, 2019).

However, it is widely recognized today that a central feature of education is the beliefs of teachers themselves. Although it is the above scholarship that may inform Ministry syllabuses, textbooks, online resources and so forth, it is teacher beliefs that to a great extent determine teacher practices which in turn dominate what actually happens in the classroom (Borg, 2017). Understanding teacher beliefs about use of L1, and the sources of such beliefs, is therefore important (Součková, 2020; Pajares, 1992).

As our literature review will show, there has been considerable research on EFL teacher beliefs in this area, and on the specific purposes and situations for which L1 use is more or less approved by teachers. However, the present study identifies a number of limitations of the existing research, some of which it goes on to address. These include the fact that research on teacher beliefs naturally relies heavily on teacher self-report in questionnaires and interviews, yet there is largely uncontrolled and/or under-discussed variation in the wording of questions used to elicit beliefs. Furthermore, often seemingly unstructured lists of 20 or more varied questions are used whereas in fact there are underlying general themes within those items that can be identified and could usefully be addressed more directly. Second, there is neglect of the full range of factors that might affect teacher beliefs, including teacher past experience and knowledge of the research evidence, institutional and peer constraints etc. Third, there is also a lack of any theoretical framework in which to address those factors. Also

missing is attention to teachers who use English as the medium of teaching but are not actually teaching English language itself, as is increasingly the case at tertiary level around the world, for example in Saudi Arabia which is our focus of attention.

2. Literature on Teacher Beliefs about the Value of L1 in the L2 Classroom

There exists a large and varied literature about the use of L1 in classroom teaching of other languages, especially English. Within that, important subareas are study of: (a) L1's actual use (often called practices), measured from observation (e.g. Moore, 2013; Kim and Elder, 2005); (b) L1 use as self-reported by teachers or students (which in effect is their beliefs about how much it is used and when, etc.) (e.g. Wilden and Porsch, 2020); (c) actual benefits or disadvantages of L1 use for learners and teachers (seen e.g. in research studies) (e.g. Anton and DiCamilla, 1998), and (d) beliefs (both of teachers and students) about benefits/disadvantages of L1 use. All those may be additionally addressed with attention to how findings vary depending on factors causing or affecting phenomena in that area (including purposes or reasons for use). The present study falls within (d), specifically targeting teacher beliefs about benefits/disadvantages of L1 use, with attention to factors affecting those beliefs. Therefore, this review focuses on (d).

However, those areas are interconnected. Teacher beliefs about benefits (d) are often claimed and found to affect (a) and (b), teacher actual or reported practices (e.g. Borg, 2017). For that reason, those beliefs are considered important. Often in such studies however it is self- reported practices that are measured (e.g. Taner and Balıkçı, 2022) rather than actual observed ones (e.g. with questionnaire items of the type 'How often do you use L1 to explain grammatical points?').

Furthermore, teacher beliefs about benefits of L1 use (d) may themselves be affected by knowledge of the actual benefits (or not) of use of L1 (c), which they may learn about in their training or self-study. This originate in what is claimed or revealed by theories of transfer (e.g. Zhang, 2022), by teaching methods like the direct method or bilingual method (Richards and Rodgers, 2014), or by studies conducted by researchers (e.g. Kerr, 2019).

A recent study focusing on teacher beliefs about L1 use and its benefits (d) is Taner and Balıkçı (2022) which studied beliefs (and reported practices) of trainee and experienced EFL teachers in Turkey. Some of the latter were teaching at tertiary level. A range of beliefs about use of L1 for a range of teaching situations/purposes were assessed in open and closed questionnaire items. Beliefs were represented with deontic statements using *may* and *should*. Many purposes, such as teaching English grammar, were asked about in parallel for 'Turkish may be used' and 'only English should be used'. The difference between those judgments was often strongest for the tertiary level teachers and was generally more in favour of using Turkish, except for 'giving instructions for activities. The in-service teachers reported Turkish was especially favoured for exam feedback, administrative information, teaching grammar and vocab and explaining points not understood. English was especially favoured for giving instructions, communicative activities, reading. The factors affecting belief included were only educational level of students taught and teaching experience (esp. preservice vs in-service).

This study has a number of good features that the present study emulates: it does include tertiary level teachers, while many studies are limited to school level teachers, and it covers beliefs about the value of using L1 across a wide range of purposes in the classroom, considered separately. Furthermore, it recognizes a major division between beliefs that favour L1 vs those that limit L1. It however also features a number of limitations commonly found and which the present paper wishes to address. First it addresses few of the factors potentially affecting those beliefs, beyond the precise purpose or function for which L1 is employed, and the teaching experience of the teacher. Second it deals with beliefs about benefits only expressed deontically, that is, as requirements sourced in some agency outside the teacher (wording with *may* and *should*) of the type 'The teacher should use L1 to help explain grammar' (Suhadi, 2011). It does not use epistemic belief formulations with the timeless present tense such as 'Students understand grammar better if the teacher uses L1'. These are worded more as

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Journal for Research Scholars and Professionals of English Language Teaching
ISSN: 2456-8104 Impact Factor: 6.895 (SJIF)
Vol. 9 | Issue 49 | May 2025 www.jrspelt.com

beliefs based on the teacher's own experience rather than some outside rule giver. Finally, there is no theoretical foundation for the factors affecting these beliefs.

Other studies of teacher beliefs about L1 efficacy have also usually covered a range of situations where teachers could use it. Bateman (2008) focused on ten student teachers with respect to beliefs about using the target language, including the extent to which they felt the target language could be used in specific activities. They believed in use of L2 to provide the maximum exposure to the target language, but that L1 could also be used for clarification where students could not understand anything or to maintain the class discipline.

İnal and Turhanlı (2019) studied 18 university EFL teachers in Turkey and found that judicious use of L1 was favoured. Overall attitude to L1 was however slightly negative. Another study, by Aqel (2006), explored teacher (and student) attitude towards the use of L1 at university level in Qatar and also found a positive view of judicious use of Arabic whenever required. Al-Nofaie (2010) conducted a similar study of teacher and student perceptions of the use of L1 in teaching English at intermediate school in Saudi Arabia. She concluded that both teachers and students endorsed the use of L1.

Overall then there is ample research evidence that teachers of English at all levels, and across many countries, mostly believe in the value of L1 in certain situations and for specific reasons. Those who are against the use of L1 emphasize the need to maximize the learner's exposure to the target language since once a student relies on L1 for help learning new words or complicated concept of grammar, they never take risk and negotiate meaning in the target language. However, despite some negative effects of L1, studies suggest that teachers generally believe it is not possible to totally avoid the use of L1 in L2 classes, especially when both teacher and students share the same L1 (Song and Andrews 2009). Teachers tend to believe that excessive and untimely use of the first language causes negative effects on the learning process. However, its minimal use can help the beginners or weak learners to overcome their confusions and anxiety. Results of the studies show that support for L1 is therefore nuanced and depends on when and what amount of L1 is used in the L2 classroom. This study aims to further investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers about the perceived efficacy in relation to occasion of L1 use at tertiary level in Saudi Arabia.

There are however a number of limitations in the existing literature. First, a study within Saudi Arabia and at tertiary level is not found. Second, the usual focus is on teachers teaching English, not on teachers who teach other subjects through English medium. Yet at tertiary level the latter is very common both in BA degrees in English departments and across other disciplines like chemistry or psychology. For example, in Saudi Arabia sociolinguistics, translation theory, applied linguistics, Shakespeare etc. would all be taught in an English or similar named department through English medium. This might affect teacher beliefs about L1 use since in that situation English is the medium not the content of learning, whereas in an English improvement class it is both. The present study includes such teachers.

Next, use of L1 is also usually referred to in teacher questionnaires without distinguishing teacher use from student use of it. Yet those might differ. Especially if the teacher does not speak the students' L1, use of L1 could only be by students. Furthermore, the effect of question wording is overlooked. Few analyze any overall distinction between positive and negative items similar to that Taner and Balıkçı (2022). Furthermore, as mentioned above, some studies use only deontic (*may, should, is appropriate*…etc.) worded items (e.g. Taner and Balıkçı, 2022). However, others use an uncontrolled mix. For example, Shabir (2017) uses some items that are deontic (e.g. 'The medium of instruction should be only English in English classroom') but also some that are epistemic (e.g. 'My students can understand the lesson much better if I use L1'). They are also mixed between wordings that are favourable to L1 (e.g. that just cited) and ones that are negative (e.g. 'The more I make use of L1, the less effort students make to understand my use of English'). In addition, some items are arguably not about teacher belief in the value of L1 at all but about teacher reported actual use (e.g. 'I sometimes speak L1 to clarify my directions'). The importance of the deontic-epistemic distinction will be taken up further below.

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ISSN: 2456-8104 Impact Factor: 6.895 (SJIF)
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Finally, reasons for, or factors affecting, variation in belief in the value of L1 is largely limited to consideration of different situations or purposes of its use (e.g. when teaching speaking, for explaining grammar, for class management, etc.). While those are clearly important, it could be argued that the influence of those is by now quite well known. Other possibly important variables related to the teacher or the context will be described below. Furthermore, there is a widespread lack of a theory in which to frame different sources of teacher belief. Insofar as they are covered, they are treated just as an unorganized list.

3. Literature on Factors Affecting Teacher Beliefs about the Use of L1 in the Classroom

An important dimension of this study is to explore the factors potentially affecting teacher beliefs about the value of use of L1 in teaching in Saudi university English (and similar) departments. This goes beyond simply treating different situations/purposes of L1 use in the classroom as the sole causes of variation. Rather than just uncover and explore an unstructured list of factors (e.g. Fives and Buehl, 2012), this study adopted a theory that provides a rationale and categories to articulate such a list. This is the Activity Theory (AT) second generation model (Engeström, 1987).

3.1. Activity Theory: An Interpretive Framework

Activity Theory (AT), particularly the second-generation version, provides an illuminating lens for understanding the complex interplay between EFL teachers' beliefs, contextual factors, tools and actions (including unconscious ones) within a sociocultural setting. Although, as its name implies, AT was initially designed to aid understanding of overt actions, it can also be applied to internal actions such as the development of beliefs. Due to the systemic nature of AT, it is well-suited for analyzing the interaction between teachers' beliefs and the various factors that affect their development. I know of only one other study that has actually employed AT in a similar belief study (Peng, 2024), although I diverge from that in my precise implementation of AT due to the fact that Peng was concerned with teacher practices as well as beliefs, while I am not. Second generation AT is essentially a qualitative model, still in respect of my quantitative research, AT is implemented as a guide to types of explanatory variables that need to be considered, as follows.

The second generation of AT positions the activity system as the primary unit of analysis. An activity in general is seen as where a subject works on an object in order to obtain a desired outcome, with four other categories also involved. The subject and object and those other four things all potentially affect each other. In the present study (see Figure 1), the **subject**, the English department teacher is conceptualized as working (largely subconsciously, on what is called the internal plane) on the **object** which is their beliefs about the use of L1 in the classroom, and the **outcome** (outside the scope of this study) would be then engaging or not engaging in the use of L1 in that context (i.e. practice). All factors potentially affecting the creation and development of object beliefs are then associated with one or more of the additional four categories in the triangle model (Figure 1). The **tools** which are regarded as mediating the activity are taken to include teacher previous experiences as a learner, teaching experience using English, educational background (e.g. BA, MA, PhD), training (pre- or in-service) and knowledge of relevant research or theory obtained from that, proficiency in English and in the students' L1 (Arabic), age and possibly gender. Although the term tools originated with the idea of physical tools used in an activity, in AT it is widely used also for mental instruments within the subject. The other three categories are essentially contextual, outside the subject. **Community** includes the institutional stakeholders (university and Ministry of Education), peer teachers, students and the cultural setting in which they operate. The **rules** refer to whatever is prescribed about L1 by Ministry policy, or in the university's program description emanating from the Quality Unit, or via oversight of teaching by supervisors within the university, etc. **Division of labour** is perhaps the least prominent in our case since the mental activity of developing beliefs has to be done by the teacher him/herself.

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ISSN: 2456-8104 Impact Factor: 6.895 (SJIF)
Vol. 9 | Issue 49 | May 2025 www.jrspelt.com

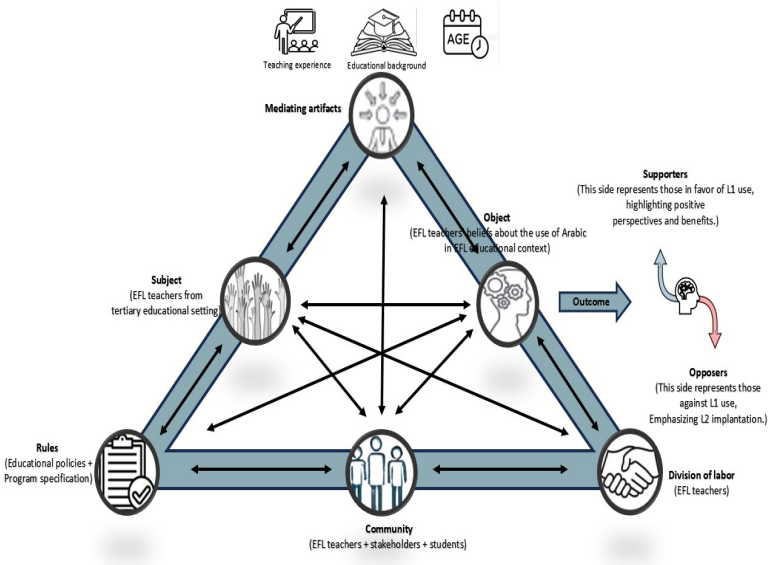

Figure 1: Activity Theory 2nd generation : EFL teachers' beliefs about the use of L1 in EFL educational context

Beyond providing a guide to relevant factors, AT emphasizes contradictions within and between elements of the activity system. For instance, a teacher's belief in the use L1 (object) might contradict institutional policies or student expectations (rules and community). Similarly, misalignment among different Tools can arise. For instance, demographic factors, like less experience, paired with strong theoretical knowledge (educational background), can create tensions that influence beliefs. Finally, AT's framework captures the interplay between Tools, Rules and Community as a dynamic, evolving process, not a fixed state.

By applying the second-generation Activity Theory framework, it is systematically possible to explore how factors within the teacher, such as demographics, act as mediating elements that shape teachers' beliefs about L1 use, situating these beliefs within a larger, dynamic sociocultural context, captured by the rules and community categories.

3.2. The Application of the AT Model in the Saudi Tertiary Level Context

Overall, the AT model distinguishes between factors at work in an activity that are contextual (for the present study these are Rules and Community), and factors that are more parts of the psychology of the subject that are employed in the activity (the Tools). This dichotomy can be connected to the types of questionnaire item wording mentioned above. When we ask teachers about beliefs worded deontically (e.g. 'Teachers should minimize the use of L1 to ensure maximum English language exposure') we can be understood as asking them about the impact on belief of outside agencies that impose an obligation, such as the university, ministry or peer teachers (Rules and Community). When, however, we ask teachers about beliefs worded epistemically (e.g. 'L1 use in the classroom helps students retain English language concepts for longer') we can be understood as asking them about the impact of knowledge that the teacher herself has gained from personal experience, training, study etc. (i.e. Tools). Therefore, in my study items with both wordings are used, in order to be able to assess the impact of each type of factor on belief.

This study also includes a number of background variables that might be considered as relating to distinct Tools whose varying involvement could explain differences in belief about the value of L1 use. These variables are found in general studies of teacher beliefs (e.g. Borg, 2017), though not presented within the AT framework, and less often in studies specifically of beliefs about the value of L1 use. They fall into three main areas.

First, personal experience of L1 use in the English class as a learner is expected to have an impact (Součková 2020). Most participants are anticipated to have received earlier education in the Saudi system. This means that probably the older they are, the more extensive would have been the use of L1 that they experienced: the Saudi

school and university system over the years has progressed somewhat towards greater use of L2 and less of L1 in the English class (Alsudais, 2017).

A second influential factor is expected to be the preparation that teachers received before embarking on tertiary level teaching: what policy it promoted or took with respect to L1, creating their knowledge about the issue. Most current university teachers in Saudi Arabia would not have received dedicated preservice training courses in teaching of or through English. Instead, they were usually considered qualified by having done at least a BA in English (or similar English-rich degree, e.g. Translation, English Literature etc.), and might have had some in-service training courses or self-education later. The Saudi BA courses in English and the like have of course evolved over the years. Although some currently include, for example, a teaching practice component, historically they mainly prepared future teachers of English only through taking taught modules such as Applied Linguistics or Pedagogy (the applied science approach to teacher education: Wallace, 1991). Hence, we can suppose that teachers of all ages who entered service via this route mostly have knowledge of this sort, which would reflect the theories, recognized methods and research findings current at the time when they took the course. That knowledge could span a wide range of views for and against L1 that teachers would therefore be aware of, and which might colour their beliefs (however, there is no space to review here the range of ideas they might have been exposed to in this way). If they also took an EFL related Masters their knowledge would be deeper, and if they took a PhD, even more so. However, the prevailing finding of general research on teacher beliefs is that they are often more influenced by factor (1) above rather than this (2) (Borg, 2003).

Third, a major source of teacher beliefs is seen as teacher experience of teaching, especially if it is reflected upon by the teacher and leads to action, so involves learning by trial and error (Wallace, 1991). Here again, the older the teacher the longer such experience they would have to draw upon.

The other major relevant area specified by AT is Rules and Community. These are now briefly described but this study does not pursue them since it is anticipated that they would be the much the same for all participants. Therefore, they would not be expected to explain any differences between teachers in belief about value of use of L1. They would be more worth targeting in studies comparing different countries where different policies with respect to L1, maybe reflecting different cultures, might be imposed by outside agencies.

In the Saudi university context, the main contextually important entities are the university authorities, especially its Quality unit (or similar entity), and the Ministry of Education that oversees universities in the country. Universities impose detailed curricula and syllabuses through Program specifications and, at a lower level, Course specifications for each taught module. They also have extensive material online, both promotional and aimed at students. Typically, this material specifies the 'teaching language' of each course or program but says nothing explicit about any role of L1 where the teaching language is English. Thus, apparently the use of L1 is left to teacher judgment. This researcher, who works in such a university, has also not experienced a feeling of any unwritten policy being imposed e.g. through oversight by supervisors or simply peer pressure from colleagues. However, it still remains possible that some teachers would feel an implied obligation to avoid L1, due to its not being overtly mentioned as having any role. On the other hand, Community also includes the students, and there is little doubt from studies of student attitudes to use of L1 that they welcome it and indeed, if it were in their power, would require it (e.g. Alharbi, 2018). Thus, quite apart from factors driving their internal beliefs, teachers face soft pressure against use of L1 from the university but more immediate pressure in favour of it from their students.

4. Research Questions

From above, the following RQs emerge, concerning tertiary level teachers in English departments (or similar) in Saudi Arabia

- What do the teachers believe about the value of use of L1 (Arabic) for different situations and purposes within the classroom?

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ISSN: 2456-8104 Impact Factor: 6.895 (SJIF)
Vol. 9 | Issue 49 | May 2025 www.jrspelt.com

- Does wording of a belief in terms of limiting versus exploiting L1 or implying only teacher use of L1 vs both teacher and student use of it, have any systematic effect on how strongly the belief is held?
- Does endorsement of a belief vary systematically depending on its source status being Tool or Rule/Community in AT terms (as implied by epistemic or deontic wording)?
- How influential are different Tools (in AT terms), such as teaching experience, educational background, and early learning, in forming these beliefs?

5. Method

This is a quantitative study which employs a questionnaire to gather data from a large sample of particular informants. Conclusions are drawn and generalized to the broader population (Cresswell, 2006).

5.1. Context and Participants

This study was conducted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where English is a foreign rather than second language. The target population was university level teachers in Saudi Arabia who use English either to teach EFL or to teach other topics common in English-related degrees through the medium of English, such as sociolinguistics, semantics, translation, literature etc., or both). Such teachers from 6 higher educational facilities were invited to participate by completing a questionnaire published online. Such teachers were deemed all likely to have relevant beliefs about the use of L1 (Arabic) in teaching. Although they constitute a volunteer sample rather than a strictly random sample, there is no reason to suppose they are not representative of the population intended.

#	Education Settings	Department	Program Specification	Participants	
				M	F
1.	KSU	Linguistics	https://colt.ksu.edu.sa/en/node/774	8	Ø
		English Language	https://colt.ksu.edu.sa/ar/node/2939	36	30
2.	PNU	English Language & Translation	https://pnu.edu.sa/en/Faculties/LN/Pages/ProgramDetails.aspx?ProgramCode=LN-BA-ENLA	Ø	11
		English literature	https://pnu.edu.sa/en/Faculties/LN/Pages/ProgramDetails.aspx?ProgramCode=LN-BA-ENLA	Ø	6
3.	IMSU	English Language and Literature	https://units.imamu.edu.sa/colleges/LanguageAndTranslation/Documents/BA%20New%20Program%20Specifications%202020.%20Final%20w-KPI.pdf	35	20
4.	KEU	English Language and Translation	https://seu.edu.sa/media/1114563/program-specification.pdf	27	18
5.	PSU	Linguistics & Translation	https://www.psu.edu.sa/en/CHS/acd-eng-descript	8	5
		Applied Linguistics	https://www.psu.edu.sa/en/CHS/acd-ling-descript	3	3
6.	AOU	English Language and Literature	https://www.arabou.edu.sa/admission/Documents/Programme%20Specification-ELL2017.pdf	6	8
Total				123	101
				224	

Table 1: Number of participants and educational contexts

Background features of participants are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. The predominant age of participants of both genders was between 31 and 50. The vast majority were native speakers of Arabic. More than two thirds had qualifications higher than BA, and a small majority had at least some years of study abroad in an English-speaking country. Overall, respondents reported more experience of teaching EFL than of teaching other

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ISSN: 2456-8104 Impact Factor: 6.895 (SJIF)
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subjects through the medium of English: only 3% reported never doing the former while 42% never did the latter.

Gender	Age in years				Total	%
	30 or less	31-40	41-50	Above 50		
Male	10	45	55	13	123	55%
Female	4	41	49	7	101	45%
Total	14	86	104	20	224	

Table 2: Gender and age of participants

Educational background		Years studying in English speaking country		Knowledge of Arabic		Years teaching using English in EFL classes		Years teaching other subjects through English medium	
Scale	*f*	Scale	*f*	Scale	*f*	Scale	*F*	Scale	*f*
BA	70 (31%)	None	101 (45%)	None	2 (1%)	None	6 (3%)	none	94 (42%)
Masters	55 (25%)	3 or less	29 (13%)	Poor	2 (1%)	5 or less	35 (16%)	5 or less	33 (15%)
PhD	99 (44%)	4-6	49 (22%)	Moderate	4 (2%)	6-10	80 (36%)	6-10	45 (20%)
		More than 6	45 (20%)	Near native	6 (3%)	11-20	77 (34%)	11-20	38 (17%)
				Native	210 (94%)	More than 20	26 (12%)	More than 20	14 (6%)

Table 3: Background of participants

5.2. Instrument

After thorough review of the existing literature, the questionnaire was designed ensuring item clarity, relevance and alignment with the research objectives (cf. Hashemi and Sabet, 2013). The questionnaire began with an informed consent section explaining the purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation.

Next came seven background/demographic items which served both to verify that respondents belonged to the population that was intended to be sampled, and to serve as explanatory variables potentially affecting the belief responses obtained (RQ4). Their incidence in the sample has been already described in Participants above.

Given the interest of this study in factors affecting beliefs about the value of L1 use (see …. Above), age was included since in Saudi Arabia it can be seen as related to how much L1 the teacher would have experienced being used in class when they first learned English themselves, which might affect their current beliefs. The older they are, the more they would have heard L1 in English class as initial learners. That experience however might have turned their belief either in favour of or against L1 use, we cannot be sure.

Teacher education level relates loosely with how much they might know about research on L1 in TEFL. The longer they have studied, the more knowledgeable they should have become. However, this could be very dependent on what topic they specifically studied, especially at PhD level. Again, we cannot say for certain in advance whether this would enhance beliefs in favour of L1 or not.

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Number of years teaching using English in EFL classes (listening, speaking, writing… etc) is very relevant to the amount of experience of use (or not) of L1 in class that a teacher will have had. That in turn impacts their beliefs drawn from that experience. Number of years teaching other subjects through the medium of English (e.g., Sociolinguistics, Syntax, Morphology) would similarly be expected to impact their beliefs about use of L1. However, in neither case can there be any certainty whether that experience (the third major Tool discussed earlier) would turn their beliefs in favour of or against use of L1.

Number of years studying abroad for a degree in an English -speaking country clearly may relate to how communicatively competent in L2 English the teacher is. Greater real-life use of L2, such as one obtains only in an L2 environment, may enhance belief in the practicability and success of low/zero use of L1 in the classroom.

Knowledge of Arabic relates to capability to use L1 in teaching in Saudi Arabia, which in turn may affect belief in L1 use. However, in the present study only 4 participants claimed less than a moderate command of Arabic so this is almost a constant rather than a variable and is not expected to impact on belief.

The main body of the questionnaire, the 20 belief items, then took the forms of statements with which the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed on a 4-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree. These items individually (RQ1) reflect the findings in the literature review above concerning what proposed or actual situation specific effects of L1 use commonly are reported as influencing belief about use of L1 in teaching in an EFL country (e.g. its use makes vocab learning easier, its non-use is intended to create an immersive L2 environment, and so on: see Appendix). The items were further designed (unlike in any other questionnaire I found) to systematically represent three dichotomies commonly found in individual questionnaire items in this area, but not systematically represented and analyzed separately (RQ 2, 3).

First, two categories of belief commonly distinguished in the belief literature in general are epistemic and deontic beliefs. The questionnaire has ten of each. The former are typically worded in the timeless simple present or with *can* in English and are understood as a general pattern a person has observed through experience, an inductive generalization, e.g. *Teachers' use of L1 fosters a deeper connection between the students' prior knowledge and new English concepts.* The latter usually use *should* or some closely synonymous expression (e.g. *appropriate, necessary*) and represent an obligation, typically imposed by some authority e.g. *Teachers should limit L1 use to beginner-level learners and phase it out as students advance.* This distinction is informative since it connects with the factors affecting beliefs. Arguably epistemic beliefs tend to reflect what the person has observed or learnt through Tools such as experience, in the present case as a learner, trainee and then teacher up to the present moment. Deontic beliefs however may reflect what a teacher feels obligated to do by external entities such as, in the present case, institutional rules, the community of practice of peer teachers, and so forth (Rules and Community).

Second it is possible for beliefs to be worded with a favourable stance, mentioning something claimed to be good, and implying in the present case positive exploitation of L1, or with a negative stance, worded in terms of limitation or exclusion of L1. The former (in 13 items) is exemplified by *The strategic use of L1 reduces student anxiety and builds confidence in learning English.* The latter (in seven items) is seen in *It is appropriate to use L1 only when students do not understand key instructions or explanations*.

Third, studies of use of L1 in teaching often do not clearly distinguish or compare between where the teacher uses L1 to the class, where a student uses L1 to the teacher, and where students use L1 with peers (e.g. in group work). The present study represented this as a two-way distinction between 11 items where reference was just to the teacher (T) using L1 compared with 9 involving potential wider use including also students and their peers (TSP): e.g. *Teachers' use of L1 fosters a deeper connection between the students' prior knowledge and new English concepts* (T) versus, *Banning L1 use entirely hinders the learning process for some students* (TSP). Table 4 below displays how each individual item was categorized in the above three ways.

5.3. Procedure

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Google Forms was the platform chosen to host the questionnaire because it is user-friendly and accessible to the target participants. The study and questionnaire were approved by the ethical research committee at my university and by each of the institutions involved. After obtaining approval, the link to the questionnaire was circulated by email among all potential participants in all six locations. (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfWXzTAEKBvNoGB4aG8kzhKtCJXDi8v1Yc5XXY-S9tFR2QhFg/viewform?usp=sf_link).

5.4. Data Analysis

Data was downloaded from Google Forms as an Excel file (n=224). Extra columns of figures were calculated by formula in Excel. These included mean agreement ratings of each person across all items and across subsets of items, such as all those classed as deontic. Statistical analysis was then conducted in JASP, using non-parametric statistics wherever possible, since the data was mostly ordinal rather than interval in nature.

Empirical confirmation of the belief types

An exploratory factor analysis (PCA with varimax rotation) was conducted to ascertain what groups of items mutually correlated highly with each other. This reflects not how much participants agreed with each stated belief but how far each person's agreement was similarly high or low across a set of items (covariance). Without knowledge of the three groupings of items designed into the questionnaire, the statistical procedure identified two major subsets of items, C1 and C2 in Table 4 (see Appendix for full figures). Those correspond closely with the a priori framework. 10 beliefs, epistemic and favouring exploitation of L1, were responded to similarly within each participant, and loaded on C1. 7 beliefs, deontic and favouring limitation of L1, loaded on C2. The other three beliefs did not fit either in C1 or C2 but differed in being deontic but in favour of exploitation of L1. This will be illuminated more in the findings.

The Cronbach alpha values for sets C1 and C2 were respectively .941 and .803. This finding supports the identification of those sets as independent scales, with members of each set reliably measuring the same thing. Together with the findings seen in Tables 4 and 5, this also supports the validity and psychological reality for the teachers of the epistemic-deontic belief distinction and of the exploiting vs limiting L1 belief stances. Only the teacher vs teacher plus student and peer distinction seems to lack support.

6. Results

Differences in belief endorsement due to individual beliefs and a priori sets of beliefs with a common feature (RQs 1-3)

The first analyses focus on the questionnaire responses of the entire sample together and reveal which individual beliefs were most and least endorsed, and whether any particular type of belief was generally preferred or dispreferred. They therefore demonstrate how far aspects of the beliefs themselves explain variation in response, without regard for variables associated with the participant teachers.

#	Item	Belief category	Teacher Stance	L1 user	Mean (scale 1-4)	*SD*
13	Teachers have a responsibility to avoid over-reliance on L1 to promote student independence in English. C2	Deontic	Limit	T	3.18*	0.56
16	Teachers should not use L1 during communicative activities to encourage students to think in English. C2	Deontic	Limit	T	3.18*	0.69
11	Teachers should minimize the use of L1 to ensure maximum English language exposure. C2	Deontic	Limit	T	3.12*	0.61
20	Teachers have an obligation to balance L1 and English use to cater to diverse learner needs. C4	Deontic	Exploit	T	3.06*	0.62
15	The use of L1 in English classrooms should only be allowed when necessary to prevent learning barriers. C2	Deontic	Limit	TSP	2.95*	0.59

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17	English classrooms should maintain an English-only policy to create an immersive environment. C2	Deontic	Limit	TSP	2.94*	0.70
12	It is appropriate to use L1 only when students do not understand key instructions or explanations. C2	Deontic	Limit	TSP	2.91*	0.63
14	Teachers should limit L1 use to beginner-level learners and phase it out as students advance. C2	Deontic	Limit	T	2.78*	0.71
1	Using L1 in the classroom helps students better understand complex grammar rules. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	TSP	2.75*	0.63
2	L1 is an effective tool for explaining difficult vocabulary in English. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	TSP	2.73*	0.63
3	Teachers' use of L1 fosters a deeper connection between the students' prior knowledge and new English concepts. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	T	2.71*	0.63
5	The strategic use of L1 reduces student anxiety and builds confidence in learning English. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	TSP	2.71*	0.65
10	Students benefit more when teachers use L1 for culturally specific explanations in English lessons. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	T	2.67*	0.68
8	Banning L1 use entirely hinders the learning process for some students. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	TSP	2.58	0.73
9	Using L1 can support the development of metacognitive skills, such as understanding how language works. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	TSP	2.56	0.66
7	L1 use in the classroom helps students retain English language concepts for longer. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	TSP	2.48	0.68
6	Students learn English faster when teachers occasionally use L1 for clarification. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	T	2.47	0.73
4	Relying on L1 in teaching can improve students' overall comprehension of lesson material. C1	Epistemic	Exploit	T	2.44	0.69
19	It is necessary for teachers to use L1 to address discipline and classroom management issues. C3	Deontic	Exploit	T	2.34*	0.74
18	Teachers should always translate difficult English words or phrases into L1 for student understanding. C3	Deontic	Exploit	T	2.34*	0.76

Table 4: Mean agreement scores for questionnaire items in descending order (* indicates significant difference of median from 2.5, on the Wilcoxon one sample median test; C1 etc. indicate membership of sets of items established via PCA)

As Table 1 shows, 75% of items were agreed with at a level above the neutral midpoint of the scale (2.5), 65% significantly so. The highest mean (3.18) corresponds to a judgment between 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Only five items (25%) were endorsed below the midpoint, with the lowest being 2.34, still close to 2.5. On five items (4 6 7 8 9) participants did not evidence a significant level of either agreement or disagreement with the belief. The average level of agreement across all items was positive, at 2.75.

The interpretation of these findings becomes clearer when we consider the types of belief item that had been chosen to be represented in the questionnaire. From Table 4 it can be seen that the beliefs most agreed with were predominantly deontic rather than epistemic, and were ones that concerned limiting rather than exploiting L1. However, there was no apparent preference related to the matter of whether the belief concerned just the teacher's use of L1 or use by a student or their peers possibly as well (T vs TSP). The pattern there was that items concerning just teacher use of L1 appeared both among the most endorsed and the least endorsed beliefs, and scattered in between.

Those observations from Table 4 are confirmed by the statistics in Table 5, where it can be seen that there was a significant difference between mean agreement ratings for the epistemic and deontic items, with the latter agreed with on average .27 higher. Furthermore, the items worded as in some way actually or potentially limiting L1 use were agreed with on average .4 higher than those worded in terms of positive exploitation of L1. By contrast there was no significant difference between agreement with beliefs about exclusive teacher use of L1 and potentially shared use involving students and their peers.

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Measure	Belief type	Mean	*SD*	Wilcoxon *z*	*df*	*P*
Agreement with type of belief proposition (scale 1-4)	Epistemic	2.61	0.543	-7.329	223	< .001
	Deontic	2.88	0.365			
	Exploit L1	2.61	0.496	-8.973	223	< .001
	Limit L1	3.01	0.436			
	T uses L1	2.75	0.357	0.950	223	0.342
	TSP use L1	2.74	0.409			

Table 5: Paired comparisons of mean agreement for sets of questionnaire items

7. Discussion

Discussion of the effects of belief type

The strong effect of belief category could be interpreted as suggesting that Saudi tertiary level teachers are more convinced by beliefs that take the form of obligations (expressed with deontic *should* and synonymous forms) rather than the form of generalizations based on experience (expressed by epistemic generic use of simple present). That in turn could be interpreted within AT as showing that they are affected more by Rules and maybe the views of their community than by empirical evidence they have gathered over the years as students and then teachers and trainees, which in AT are Tools. This preference could in turn be put down to Saudi culture, which is analysed as more collectivist than that in the West (Hofstede, 2001, 2024). This means that Saudis, compared with most westerners, are more aware of and responsive to the common good and fitting in with the community, rather than individual enterprise. That in turn suggests they might give preference to beliefs expressed in a deontic way by the community, rather than follow beliefs arising from their own personal experience.

However, clearly the stance that the belief expressed with respect to use of L1 also played a very strong role, with the highest mean agreement being achieved by the set of items expressing some kind of limit or even elimination of use of L1, in contrast with those that rather mentioned some way in which L1 was beneficial. Here we perhaps see the effect of the fact that the teachers were all at university level and responding not only or even primarily about L1 in the EFL lessons but rather in the classroom where all kinds of subjects were being taught, albeit through the medium of English. For that reason their very top favoured beliefs concerned limiting L1 to ensure student exposure to English, its use for communication, and production of independent English users (rather than promoting learning of its grammar, vocab etc., which fell under exploitation). Possibly the specific considerations of higher education classes in Saudi Arabia played a role.

It so happened that the deontic beliefs were predominantly also ones focused on L1 limitation. However, the effect sizes show that the stance variable had a slightly stronger influence on belief agreement than the belief category (deontic vs epistemic): rank biserial correlation for stance was .73, while for deontic/epistemic category it was .61. Against the usual pattern, the two lowest scoring lowest scoring items (18 and 19) were deontic but favouring exploiting L1. The fact that they score lowest, significantly below the neutral 2.5, demonstrates that it is the stance feature of a belief that decides the level of teacher agreement rather than the belief category (since deontic is usually associated with high teacher endorsement of a belief).

The joint effect of category and stance together may be clearly seen in two beliefs that focused on a very similar topic, L1 assistance in learning: 15 and 8. Item 15 was *The use of L1 in English classrooms should only be allowed when necessary to prevent learning barriers*, deontic and focused on limiting L1: this scored mean 2.95, significantly high. By contrast, item 8 was *Banning L1 use entirely hinders the learning process for some students*, which was epistemic and focused on not restricting but exploiting use of L1: this scored only mean 2.58, not significantly different from the neutral midpoint of the scale (2.5). This suggests it is the restrictive rule-like wording and the stance of the belief (negative vs positive) that often decides how far these teachers

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accept it, rather than the detailed substance of it (i.e. what specific aspect of the classroom teaching the belief focuses on).

Differences in endorsement of beliefs due to background features of participants (RQ4)

Table 6 shows the relationships between the background variables (reflecting Tools in the AT interpretation) and the types of belief. Overall, it is noticeable that the great majority of relationships are negative, meaning that low values on the background variables were associated with higher approval of each type of belief. Furthermore, no relationships (measured with Spearman rho) were especially strong: the strongest is -.253, whereas a really strong correlation would be twice that.

Turning to the relationships that were significant, there were no such relationships obtained for age group, knowledge of Arabic or years of EFL teaching. Gender recorded just one: males more than females endorsed the beliefs where just the teacher's use of L1 was targeted.

Just three variables then accounted for most of the significant relationships: educational level, years in an English-speaking environment, and years of teaching other subjects through English.

		Deontic	Epistemic	Exploit L1	Limit L1	T	TSP
Gender (1=male, 2=female)	*rho*	-.092	-.119	-.110	-.089	-.155	-.089
	p	.169	.079	.099	.185	.020*	.182
Age group	*rho*	-.077	-.130	-.100	-.040	-.102	-.093
	p	.253	.053	.134	.553	.129	.165
Highest educational level	*rho*	-.233	-.099	-.253	.002	-.183	-.230
	p	< .001*	.141	<.001*	.975	.006*	<.001*
Years studying in English speaking country	*rho*	-.201	-.051	-.191	.003	-.149	-.188
	p	.003*	.445	.004*	.963	.026*	.005*
Knowledge of Arabic	*rho*	-.096	.047	-.089	.013	-.035	-.088
	p	.153	.481	.186	.845	.601	.190
Years teaching EFL in English	*rho*	.054	-.055	.032	-.053	-.043	.037
	p	.424	.415	.632	.432	.523	.585
Years teaching other subjects in English	*rho*	-.250	-.136	-.238	-.077	-.212	-.252
	p	<.001*	.043*	<.001*	.249	.001*	<.001*

Table 6. Background variables in relation to types of belief (* = *p*<.05)

Discussion of the individual difference factors affecting belief about use of L1

It had been expected that knowledge of L1 would not have a significant effect, and there was no reason to expect a gender difference. However, it was surprising that age group had no significant effect on belief, since over the years, with a number of Ministry revisions of the English syllabus and textbooks, school teaching of English has slowly come to feature more speaking of English in the classroom. This in turn might have affected the beliefs of schoolchildren who later became teachers. However, perhaps we can interpret this result as due to the predominant age of teachers in the study being 31 or higher. Possibly the changes in the schools occurred too recently to have affected them.

Highest educational level and years studying in an English-speaking country correlate with each other at a moderate level (*rho*=.454, p<.001) as would be expected, since teachers would typically have done BA in Saudi Arabia, Masters in either Saudi Arabia or abroad, and PhD very likely abroad. Their relationships with belief are

therefore similar. Interestingly teachers with lower levels of education and study in an English speaking country are more likely than those with higher levels to endorse deontic beliefs, and beliefs that favour exploiting L1 in the classroom (used both by teachers and students). Possibly this reflects limited exposure to the western empiricist tradition which students doing a PhD, especially abroad, typically obtain. Such teachers still show adherence to Saudi traditional collectivist culture where the rules of the group, culturally favouring L1, take precedence over knowledge gained from experience by the individual.

Finally, surprisingly, while years of EFL teaching experience had no effect, years of teaching other subjects through the medium of English (within an English department or similar) had the most prominent effects of all the background variables included in the study. Teachers with fewer years of that sort of teaching endorsed all beliefs, except those explicitly worded as limiting L1, more than teachers with more experience. The relationship was however stronger for deontic than for epistemic beliefs. This suggests a difference in contextual effect between the EFL classroom and the other subject classroom. Most English Dept teachers in the Saudi context have some experience of both types of teaching: there was no simple negative correlation between amount of each type of teaching (*rho*=.084, *p*=.209). Clearly however in the subject classes the teaching focus is more on the subject content (e.g. psycholinguistics, semantic theories, Shakespeare etc.) than on the language itself. What experience brings here is a realisation perhaps that there is less need for beliefs of any sort about exploitation of L1 by teacher and students, either expressed in a deontic or epistemic way. Possibly they feel that the focus needs to be on beliefs about the subject matter and its teaching, which were of course outside the scope of the present study.

8. Conclusion

With respect to individual beliefs, the study showed similar results to others reviewed in that L1 was endorsed more in certain specific functions such as explaining difficult points and less in others such as communicative activities. However, an important new contribution was that level of endorsement was systematically higher when the belief was expressed as a limitation on L1 (vs an opportunity to exploit it) and when it was presented as an obligation (deontic rather than epistemic). This indicates the need for more studies analyzing response in such terms, so as to be able to see beyond each individual belief. In addition, it would be interesting to know if this was replicated in non-collectivist cultural context.

The factors affecting differences in belief (other than the specific function of L1 involved) were helpfully operationalized within the Activity Theory framework. Three factors with Tool status and deriving from background participant features had a similar effect. They were highest educational level attained, years studying in English speaking country, and years spent teaching through English medium (rather than teaching English language itself). Higher levels of all these accompanied lower endorsements of deontic beliefs and of beliefs about exploiting L1. This could be due to experience, both in and out of class, of communicative use of English (where using rather than learning English is the main aim). This could have driven realization that L1 is less necessary. This also confirms the value of not limiting participants to those who teach English, without whom this finding might not have appeared.

These results come from a quite large survey, compared with those in the literature. However, these findings need to be replicated in other contexts. This study points the way towards a more sophisticated analyses of teacher beliefs about L1, and the factors affecting them, within a theory such as AT.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares "No conflict of interest".

APPENDIX

Principal Component Analysis of the responses to the 20 beliefs (Threshold .4)

	Component Loadings			
	PC1	PC2	PC3	Uniqueness
Using L1 in the classroom helps students better understand complex grammar rules.	0.879			0.217
The strategic use of L1 reduces student anxiety and builds confidence in learning English.	0.857			0.255
L1 is an effective tool for explaining difficult vocabulary in English.	0.855			0.264
Teachers' use of L1 fosters a deeper connection between the students' prior knowledge and new English concepts.	0.833			0.302
L1 use in the classroom helps students retain English language concepts for longer.	0.820			0.256
Students benefit more when teachers use L1 for culturally specific explanations in English lessons.	0.804			0.340
Using L1 can support the development of metacognitive skills, such as understanding how language works.	0.774			0.317
Students learn English faster when teachers occasionally use L1 for clarification.	0.750			0.364
Relying on L1 in teaching can improve students' overall comprehension of lesson material.	0.687			0.439
1nning L1 use entirely hinders the learning process for some students.	0.610			0.538
It is appropriate to use L1 only when students do not understand key instructions or explanations.	0.415	0.559		0.433
Teachers should minimize the use of L1 to ensure maximum English language exposure.		0.791		0.350
Teachers should not use L1 during communicative activities to encourage students to think in English.		0.772		0.346
The use of L1 in English classrooms should only be allowed when necessary to prevent learning barriers.		0.745		0.374
Teachers have a responsibility to avoid over-reliance on L1 to promote student independence in English.		0.655		0.546
Teachers should limit L1 use to beginner-level learners and phase it out as students advance.		0.602		0.484
English classrooms should maintain an English-only policy to create an immersive environment.		0.595		0.487
Teachers should always translate difficult English words or phrases into L1 for student understanding.			0.822	0.211
It is necessary for teachers to use L1 to address discipline and classroom management issues.			0.773	0.345
Teachers have an obligation to balance L1 and English use to cater to diverse learner needs.				0.703
	Note. Applied rotation method is varimax.			