English only? The linguistic choices of teachers of young EFL learners

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Abstract

Move 2 step 1

step2

step3

This research attempted to explore the language patterns of teachers of varying linguistic backgrounds teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to young learners. In particular it examined the teachers' use of the students' first language (L1). The sample included six teachers teaching EFL to young learners in Hebrew and Arabic medium schools. Results reveal diverse use patterns, some of which differ from those previously found in older learner populations, and can be attributed to the teachers' personal pedagogical beliefs and assumptions regarding the goals of young learner programs and the role of L1 use.

Key words

L1 in language teaching

EFL teachers' beliefs

young EFL learners

young language learners

1 Introduction

Foreign language teaching and learning environments are potentially multilingual, for in addition to the target language they can also include the linguistic repertoire of both the learners and teacher (Blyth, 2003). The question is whether this linguistic potential, particularly the learners' first language (L1), should be legitimized as one of the tools for teaching the new language, and if so, to what extent and for what purpose. Language teaching pedagogy has tended to ignore or even suppress bilingual or multilingual options endorsing a predominantly monolingual policy, one which equates 'good teaching' with exclusive or nearly exclusive target language use. Recently, however, this assumption and ensuing methodology are being contested.

Issues concerning mother-tongue use are pertinent to teaching young language learners (YLLs) who are in the initial stages of being introduced to a new language of which they have minimal knowledge. Little is known about the linguistic practices of teachers in YLL programs, and how these practices compare with those of teachers of older and/or more proficient learners. Since YLL programs are becoming increasingly common world wide, issues concerning teachers' beliefs about and implementations of L1 use are becoming more and more relevant in terms of curriculum planning and on-going decision-making (Raschka, Sercombe, & Chi-Ling, 2009).

The research reported herewith attempted to shed some light on the instructional linguistic choices of language teachers in young learner programs and the reasons that

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motivate them, by examining EFL teachers in Israel teaching young children (6- to 8-year-olds). In order to investigate whether the teachers' choices are affected by the students' first language, the study looked at two linguistic learner populations studying English as a foreign language (EFL): speakers of Arabic and speakers of Hebrew.

The article will first survey research on using first language versus the target language (TL) in the language classroom, and the arguments brought forth to support or counter this phenomenon. It will then introduce this dilemma within the framework of teaching languages to young learners and present the findings and implications of the research study.

2 The first language versus the target language debate

Perceptions as to the role of the learners' L1 in the second and foreign language class have undergone significant changes over the years in accordance with the premises underlying dominant language teaching approaches in different periods (Cook, 2001; Crawford, 2004). Consequently these perceptions range from using the students' L1 as a medium of instruction in the Grammar Translation Approach, to a total rejection of L1 use as in the Direct, Natural and Audio-lingual approaches, to yet a somewhat more moderate view which advocates target language (TL) dominance yet allows for some restricted L1 concessions in the present era (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2007).

The discussion as to the extent of L1 use is not merely pedagogical, for it reflects and touches upon major concepts and current beliefs in language learning and teaching, specifically the nature of language knowledge in global multilingual societies, learning as a sociocultural phenomenon, and the significance of native or non-native background in language learning and teaching (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Belz, 2003; Chavez, 2003; Cook, 2001; Medgyes, 1994).

Proponents for maximizing TL use emphasize the benefits of language exposure, which, it is maintained, can bring about language learning gains in the form of effective and confident language use, as well as intercultural competence (Duff & Polio, 1990; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). The overriding policy in many contexts has therefore been to strive to maximize TL use, especially in situations where the teacher constitutes the only model for language exposure (Crawford, 2004; Turnbull, 2001). Though concessions towards mother-tongue use can be found in some teaching manuals and course books, the basically monolingual TL approach is still largely understood to be axiomatic, and as such, has a major impact on teaching beliefs, teaching methods and teacher training programs (Macaro, 2001, 2005).

The last two decades have sparked renewed interest in the L1 versus TL debate with a new approach emerging, one which views the students' L1 as a meaningful component in the learning process, and calls for hybridity rather than monolingual exclusivity (Canagarajah, 2007). This approach perceives L1 as a resource, an asset rather than an impediment, an invaluable knowledge base that learners bring to the language-learning experience, which should be utilized rather than ignored. Cook (2001, 2005) critically appraises the 'monolingual myth' and its underlying assumptions, calling for recognition of the concept of multicompetence, 'the knowledge of two or more languages in

one mind' (Cook, 2005: 48). Cook further argues that language learning approaches need to abide by norms that acknowledge the learners' existing knowledge in the first language, thereby creating an authentic interactive L1 and TL teaching mode using code-switching strategies. Language knowledge standards and teaching and learning assumptions, therefore, need to be reconsidered in light of multilingual constructs, rather than according to native speaker norms (Cook, 2001). Similarly, Blyth (1995) and Chavez (2003) emphasize that the 'no first language policy' contradicts and ignores the realities of the Foreign Language classroom as a diglossic speech community, where each of the languages—the TL and L1—serves a different function and needs to be recognized as such.

Cummins (2008: 72) likewise contests what he refers to as 'the uncritical acceptance of monolingual instructional assumptions'. Specifically he makes the point that despite its prevalence, there is no empirical basis that can back up the supposition that exclusive TL use correlates with improved learning gains. Cummins provides two main arguments in favor of L1 use. The first is the contribution of prior knowledge to learning, which in the case of language learning refers to the activation of the first language in the learning process. The second is the interdependence across languages hypothesis, according to which underlying academic abilities in the first language, such as conceptual elements, metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies, pragmatic aspects, specific linguistic elements and phonological awareness, can be transferred to the second language, provided that the learner's knowledge is at the threshold level. The learners' first language plays a major role in facilitating this transfer and instead of being silenced needs a method that can activate and capitalize on it (Cummins, 2008).

Analysis conducted from a sociocultural perspective demonstrates that activating the students' former knowledge allows for active student involvement in the learning process and for using the L1 as a means to scaffold learning and co-construct knowledge (Antón & DiCamilla, 1999; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). The vetoing of L1 use is applied to identity issues, for since language acts as a marker of identity, denial of first language use also denies students part of their identity and demeans the value of their language in comparison with the TL (Belz, 2003). From a critical pedagogy perspective, monolingual teaching policies are perceived as instituting power relations that uphold the native-speaker teacher while suppressing the non-proficient non-native-speaking students (Auerbach, 1993), or conversely, the non-native language teacher especially when referring to high status languages such as English (Braine, 1999; Phillipson, 1992).

The pendulum has thus swung to a certain extent towards reconsidering the possible use of L1 in language teaching. The crucial question that needs to be addressed is whether the key players, that is, the teachers who ultimately determine the linguistic classroom policy, endorse such views.

3 Teachers' instructional choices

A number of research studies have tried to fathom the extent to which teachers utilize their students' (and in some cases their own) L1 in the instructional process. These studies have looked at the scope of L1 use and the functions it fulfills, as well as the

reasoning and beliefs that teachers uphold (Duff & Polio, 1990; Peng & Zhang, 2009; Polio & Duff, 1994; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002; Raschka, Sercombe, & Chi-Ling, 2009; Turnbull, 2001). It is important to point out that in all cases, students shared the same L1. The most striking realization that arises from the findings is the marked variability among teachers in terms of their L1 practices, which can occur even within the same institution (Guthrie, 1984). These practices seem to be individualized, and to depend on factors related both to the teaching context and to personal variables, such as local policy, the level of instruction and level of students' proficiency, lesson contents, objectives and materials, the teachers' pedagogical training, experience in the TL culture and perceived program goals (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). 'L1 use', concludes Edstrom (2006: 289) in a personal reflective study of her own language use practices, 'is in fact, a subjective issue'.

The variability comes across most clearly in the frequency of L1 use found to range as much as between 10 per cent to 90 per cent per lesson (i.e. the percentage of L1 use by the teacher out of the overall teacher-talk in a given classroom period, as in Duff & Polio, 1990), versus levels of L1 use fixed relatively low in other cases (Guthrie, 1984; Macaro, 2001). Using discourse analysis to examine data collected in their 1990 research, Polio and Duff (1994) found that the instructors' code-switching caused communication breakdowns and interfered with the TL acquisition process. Conversely, in the case of limited L1 use, opposed qualms are raised as to the possible stifling of the learners' language development as a result of low L1 input (Levine, 2003).

Interestingly, teachers are often unaware of the scope and nature of their L1 use, with a noticeable gap evident between the teacher's self-perceived mostly underestimated L1 use, versus the higher observed use reported by the students or even the teachers themselves based on recorded data (Levine, 2003). Edstrom (2006), for example, in reflecting on her own L1 practices in the Spanish foreign language classroom, comments on the gap between her perceived and observed L1 English use, expressing feelings of remorse at her excess use:

> I sometimes feel like I'm a little too free with English and am actually surprised as I consider how much I've used this week. I do feel a definite obligation to avoid English as much as possible and plan my lesson with transparencies, handouts, etc. to that end. (Edstrom, 2006: 280)

Unlike the diversity in the occurrence of L1–TL use, analysis of the functions for which teachers tend to use the L1 reveals some commonalities. Introducing and analyzing grammar structures seems to be a salient L1 function, as are cross-cultural discussions, explaining errors and providing feedback, checking for comprehension, creating a non-threatening learning environment and carrying out a number of functions simultaneously when teaching in mixed-level classes (Auerbach, 1993; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002). Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie (2002) divide these functions into three major categories: translation, metalinguistic uses, and communicative uses which include three subcategories: managing the class, teacher reaction to student's request in L1, and expressing the teacher's state of mind (Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002: 409–410). All in all it seems that teachers tend to use the L1 (rather than the TL) more for grammar-focused practices and classroom management than for communicative tasks (Levine, 2003).

Though the functions noted are similar, teachers' practices were observed to fluctuate when applied to different learner groups. Crawford (2004) found that language teachers tend to view TL use more favorably in higher grades than in lower primary classes, and to differentiate between advanced and less advanced learners in this respect. Likewise, the degree of group heterogeneity was seen to have an impact upon teachers' L1 use, as it was implemented to assist the weaker students to keep up with their studies, especially with abstract notions and new ideas (Schmidt-Sendai, 1995). L1 versus TL choices did not correlate with the teachers' proficiency level as no difference was found between native and non-native TL speakers (Crawford, 2004; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002), hence repudiating previous assumptions as to the impact of the teacher's TL proficiency on L1 classroom use (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002).

Some of the research studies present the teachers' espoused beliefs or explanations for their linguistic choices. Edstrom (2006) identifies three reasons for her L1 use: the first is what she views as a moral obligation to her students; the second is having additional goals as a language teacher, such as dealing with stereotypical notions of the TL speakers (a discussion which requires L1 use); and the last is ease of use at particular moments, or what she refers to as 'my laziness' (2006: 288). Crawford (2004) found that teachers make extensive use of L1 because they feel that it facilitates cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparisons.

Another question of interest is whether different student backgrounds, such as linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences, affect teachers' beliefs on and use of L1. Research conducted in Israel (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2005) compared the perceptions of two groups of EFL teacher candidates, Hebrew speakers versus speakers of Arabic, on using the learners' L1 in the EFL classroom. Results showed that despite the fact that the respondents belonged to different ethnic cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they held similar opinions as to when and why the learners' first language—Hebrew or Arabic—should be used. The major L1 use functions mentioned by both groups included clarification, communication and managerial purposes. The consensus among the teacher candidates was attributed to their common status and training program, as well as to the 'culture' of English language teaching (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2005).

In trying to make sense of the emerging often puzzling and contradictory data of abundant versus limited L1 use, Macaro (2001: 545) calls for instituting a framework 'that identifies when reference to the L1 can be a valuable tool and when it is simply used as an easy option'. In response, Levine (2003) offers three tenets for L1–TL use: the *Optimal Use Tenet,* which accepts the role of the L1 in the FL class; *the Marked L1 Tenet,* which sees L1 use for pedagogical functions as a marked code compared to the TL; and *the Collaborative Language Use Tenet* which refers to the active role students need to take in using both their L1 and the TL in the multilingual classroom environment (Levine, 2003: 355).

4 Young learners

Most of the research surveyed was conducted among university students and as such was geared towards their academic language learning setting. Since the instructional linguistic choices made by teachers seem to be influenced by their teaching context, the question which arises is whether teaching younger learners in school (rather than academic) sites,

would yield similar or different results regarding teachers' L1–TL choices. One of the few research studies conducted on a school site with children aged 11–14 (Macaro, 2001) illustrates this point, for it showed that the major function served by the limited L1 use was classroom discipline, more relevant to school rather than university-based settings.

Recent research into YLL programs has acknowledged such programs as unique teaching entities because of the learners' cognitive, affective, physical and social needs (Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek-German, 2006). Research also points at a great variability among the programs themselves in terms of their goals, ranging from a focus on initial exposure and language awareness to learning a subject area in English (Martin, 2000), the learning and teaching practices and the decision to focus on either the language or on content (Inbar-Lourie & Shohamy, 2009).

Current foreign language teaching approaches for young learners advocate the integration or embedding of the TL with the topics and concepts from the general curriculum (Johnstone, 2000), using task-based methodology (Cameron, 2001; Curtain, & Dahlberg, 2004; Driscoll Jones, Martin, & Graham-Matheson, 2004). Implementing this approach has far-reaching implications in terms of the need for mother-tongue use, especially considering the young beginners' limited language proficiency. Carless (2002) examined the use of L1 in task-based learning among young students (aged 6–7) focusing on their language use, showing that the use of the L1 (Cantonese) was more frequent in linguistically complex and open tasks.

The teacher's role in YLL programs is viewed as paramount, for it is the teacher who mediates initial TL exposure and input, as well as introduces metalinguistic and intercultural concepts (Edelenbos et al., 2006; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000). Previous research which focused on different teaching models for young learners (homeroom teachers versus trained EFL teachers), demonstrated that homeroom teachers tended to embed the TL within other school-based content areas, utilizing the mother tongue to discuss abstract notions which come up as part of the learning experience (Shohamy & Inbar-Lourie, 2006).

Instructional L1 use policies are likely to be more negligent in the case of YLLs, for even TL proponents agree to lessen the stringent policy for novice learners. However, not much is known about L1 versus TL in these contexts. The teacher's linguistic choices could potentially be affected by a myriad age or program-based factors, some similar to other contexts and some unique. Since despite the growing numbers of YLL programs (especially in English studies, see, e.g. Graddol, 2006; Nikolov & Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2006), there is hardly any research available on teachers' L1 use, this exploratory research set out to collect initial data on teachers' L1 use in YLL classrooms. The following research questions were postulated.

1 What are the L1 use patterns of teachers teaching young EFL learners in terms of frequency and purpose?
2 Can L1 use patterns be accounted for by teachers' beliefs?
3 Can different tendencies be detected for different first languages?

5 The research context

The research was conducted in Israel where both Hebrew and Arabic are official languages and English is the first foreign language. Hebrew speakers study in Hebrew medium schools and Arabic speakers, who form about 20 per cent of the population, study in Arabic medium schools. The study of English at an early age in Hebrew medium schools has increased meaningfully over the last decade with over 50 per cent of the schools starting in either Grade 1 or 2. In Arabic-speaking schools EFL is usually introduced later on after Literary Arabic (first grade) and Hebrew (Grades 2 or 3). There are, however, some cases of an earlier start, usually in mixed Jewish Arab cities. The very issue of EFL starting age is controversial as are other program-related factors, namely program goals and the teaching model (whether an EFL teacher or the homeroom teacher). There are no set standards for English studies at this age nor a national exam (unlike for older students), and the teaching is extremely diversified, quite unusual in a centralized curriculum educational system as is the case in Israel. The teachers of English in the Hebrew schools are either Israeli born who acquired English as an additional language, native English speakers who came to Israel from English-speaking countries or grew up in English-speaking homes, or non-native English and Hebrew speakers who immigrated to Israel from other countries, most often from the former USSR. Most, if not all, the teachers in the Arabic-speaking schools are native speakers of Arabic, who acquired English as a foreign language. Similar to other world contexts some of the teachers for YLLs, particularly in the first or second grade, are homeroom teachers not specifically trained to teach EFL (Shohamy & Inbar-Lourie, 2006).

6 Research methods

6.1
Participants

The sample consisted of six teachers from four different schools, two Arabic schools and two Hebrew schools. All six are certified teachers, five were trained as EFL teachers and one is a homeroom teacher who teaches English in her first grade class. Two of the schools, one Arabic speaking and the other Hebrew speaking, are located in close vicinity in a mixed Jewish–Arab city. The second Hebrew school is located in a different neighborhood in the same city, while the fourth school (Arabic medium) is situated in a small Arab town in the central part of the country.

In terms of their first language all the teachers are non-native English speakers. The teachers teaching in the Arab schools have Arabic as their first and dominant language; two of the three teachers in the Hebrew schools are Hebrew L1 speakers, and one is a speaker of Russian who immigrated to Israel from the former USSR. In terms of teaching experience the range is quite wide with two years of teaching experience for the most novice teacher to up to 35 years for the most experienced. In three out of the four schools, EFL studies begin in the first grade and in one school in the second grade. Table 1 summarizes this data for each of the participants.

Table 1
The teachers' sample

Teacher	Teachers' L1	Students' L1	School location
Nigel	Arabic	Arabic	Mixed Arab–Jewish city
Natasha	Russian	Hebrew	Mixed Arab–Jewish city
Shula	Hebrew	Hebrew	Mixed Arab–Jewish city
Rim	Arabic	Arabic	Arab town
Miri	Hebrew	Hebrew	Jewish city
Eman	Arabic	Arabic	Arab town

6.2
Instruments

Data were collected in the 2007–2008 school year using three tools:

1 Classroom observations which recorded the frequency and purpose of L1 use in different parts of the lessons focusing on the purpose of the activities and the different interactions: for example, the opening and closure of the lesson, teaching focus, student feedback and evaluation; transition among activities and classroom management.
2 The second tool was a teacher's self-report questionnaire adapted from a questionnaire used and validated in a previous research (Shohamy & Inbar-Lourie, 2006), with 73 open and closed items on background variables, perceptions and attitudes regarding teaching YLLs; attitudes towards using the students' L1 in the EFL class and self-assessment of English proficiency.
3 Semi-structured interviews: following the classroom observations the teachers were interviewed with questions focusing on the issues which formed the teachers' questionnaire. In addition at this point the teachers were also asked to reflect on their L1 use, and queries arising from classroom observations were clarified and considered. The semi-structured interviews lasted about 45 minutes and were conducted in the language of the teacher's choice (Hebrew, Arabic or English). Pseudo names for the teachers are used throughout.

6.3
Data collection and analysis

Each teacher was observed for at least three lessons by Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking researchers. The frequency of L1 use for different purposes in the various parts of the lesson was tallied and quantified in terms of percentages out of the overall amount of language use by the teacher in the lessons observed.

In order to compare the teachers to each other they were then placed on a five-point scale according to the percentage of their L1 use (Hebrew/Arabic). Each interval on the scale signified 20 per cent of L1 use (i.e. 1 = 20%; 2 = 40%; 3 = 60%; 4 = 80%; 5 = 100% L1 use). Each of the teachers was then placed on the scale at the level that matched the degree of her L1 use. The graphic representation of this scale is presented in Figure 1. This method is similar (though not identical) to the one used in Crawford (2004), where

Table 2
Teachers' percentage of L1 use and their positioning on the L1 use scale

Teacher	% L1 use**	Position on L1 use scale*
Nigel	75.6	4
Natasha	74.3	4
Shula	59.3	3
Rim	56.8	3
Miri	28.7	2
Eman	6.8	1

*(1 = minimal use, 4 = extensive use)
**(refers to the students' L1 Arabic/Hebrew)

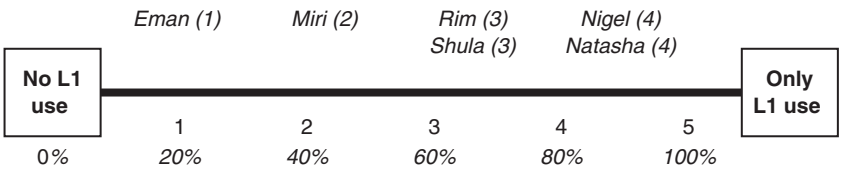

Figure 1
The EFL teachers' L1 (Arabic/Hebrew) continuum*

* (refers to the students' L1)

the respondents estimated the frequency of L1 use versus observed frequency in the present research.

7 Findings

In order to answer the first research question, the teachers' language use during the different parts of the EFL lesson was observed and as was explained earlier, the accumulated percentage of L1 use per teacher was computed. Results range from 6.8 per cent to 75.6 per cent L1 use, similar to findings by Duff and Polio (1990). Table 2 displays these results per teacher, from the highest to lowest L1 use.

In terms of the L1-use intervals, two teachers, Nigel in an Arabic school and Natasha in a mixed-city Hebrew-speaking school, fall between the 60 and 80 per cent bracket (4 on the continuum); Rim, who teaches in an Arab town and Shula who works together with Natasha in a Hebrew-speaking school, both use the students' L1 40–60 per cent of the time (number 3 on the continuum); one teacher, Miri, teaching in a Hebrew school uses Hebrew 28.7 per cent of the time (number 2 on the continuum), and Eman, teaching with Rim in the same Arab school, was found to use Arabic only 6.8 per cent of the time and is placed in the lowest (0%–20%) interval of L1 classroom use. Since only two languages were used in the classroom—the students' L1 (whether Hebrew or Arabic) and the TL English—the less L1 a teacher uses the more the TL English is used in the classroom and vice versa.

Based on these figures, the teachers' L1 use can be divided into three broad categories: (a) mostly L1 use (number 4 on the continuum); (b) combined L1 and TL use (number 3 on the continuum); (c) mostly TL use (numbers 1 and 2 on the continuum).

In general the teachers were found to employ the students' L1 for a number of common functions: *instructional*: facilitating comprehension; explaining grammar,

new words and concepts; *managerial*: classroom management (instructions, discipline); providing feedback; and for *affective* purposes, such as encouraging and comforting students. Interestingly, the homeroom teacher (Shula) teaching in the first grade exhibited a different use pattern, embedding information from other subjects that she teaches the same students, such as math and nature, into her TL teaching (reinforcing the findings in Shohamy and Inbar-Lourie, 2006). She also used the EFL classroom for introducing new concepts as will be detailed later. This phenomenon was not observed in the other teachers' lessons. On the contrary, in a few instances when the opportunity presented itself for the teacher to delve into 'non-English' topics it was not seized upon.

In the interviews, the teachers were asked to reflect on their L1 use. Unlike some of the previous studies the teachers in this research seemed well aware of the amount of TL, or conversely L1, that they use, and rationalized that use. The following is an individual account of the observed data as well as the reasoning provided by each teacher (via the questionnaires and interviews) presented according to their degree of L1 use.

(a)

Mostly L1 use

Nigel has Arabic as her mother tongue. She has been teaching English for 4 years in a school situated in a mixed Arabic–Jewish city. She views teaching young versus older learners (from Grade 4) as constituting two different categories, necessitating different teaching foci and style, and therefore differential L1 use policies. She holds the view that her role as a teacher in the low grades is simply to provide exposure, rather than teach the language and to develop a positive attitude towards the language to facilitate future studies: 'I want them to love the language in order to be successful in the future.'

She therefore introduces the language through fun activities, songs, games. Starting from Grade 4 she uses the TL for instructions and tasks, as by then the students are familiar with language use patterns and vocabulary and can comprehend and produce full sentences. She states that the functions for which she uses the L1 for both young and older learners are similar, for translation and explanation, but the proportions are different, in other words, much more L1 use for the very young learners. She also uses Arabic to deal with disciplinary issues as it is more 'spontaneous'. In following the notion of confidence building and positive attitudes, positive feedback is provided in English, the TL, 'because this is how it should be done, isn't it?'

Throughout the observations, it was evident that Nigel tends to code-switch between the L1 and TL when introducing or reviewing material, or when giving instructions. For example: 'Give me a sentence with the word [Arabic] elephant [English]', and 'Circle the letter 'e' in the word [Arabic], please [English]'. The target language, English, is mainly used in formulaic greetings and repetitions. In contrast to the lack of TL use in the teacher talk, the writing on the board is in English only, and together with an 'English corner' in the classroom a visual English learning environment is created.

Natasha is a veteran teacher, but most of her teaching experience was gained in the former Soviet Union where she received her teacher training and taught for many years. She finds teaching 7–8-year-olds very difficult and has lots of management issues. Most of the children in the class are Hebrew speakers with a few L1 Russian speakers, as well as a number of speakers of Arabic. All are fluent in Hebrew. Natasha tries to cope

with the disciplinary issues that she faces by constantly code-switching between English and Hebrew, with Hebrew definitely gaining the upper hand. It is used exclusively for classroom management and for providing evaluative positive or negative feedback. She code-mixes questions, for example, 'What is [Hebrew] bells [English]', with the pupils responding in L1. Giving instructions is mainly done in Hebrew, but some of the instructions are then translated into English. The TL is used for repetition purposes by both teacher and students as when repeating sentences from the story. Moreover, the teacher checks comprehension using L2, 'show me your pencil', 'show me your notebook' and pupils respond by gesturing.

Natasha feels that using the L1 for teaching YLLs is imperative for providing the child with a 'sense of achievement'. She supports early young language learning for 'when they start to learn language skills early, it helps them to develop as learners', and believes that using the learners' mother tongue cannot be avoided when teaching learners of this age. Indeed Natasha was found to use the L1 for about 75 per cent of the lesson. This approach seems to emanate from her beliefs in what seems like a learner-centered, rather than language-centered, approach for young beginning learners. The fact that she is struggling with class management problems also accounts for this use, though to no avail.

(b)

Combined L1 and TL use

Rim speaks Arabic as a mother tongue. She has been teaching English for 11 years, nine of which were spent in a Hebrew-speaking school and this is her second year of teaching young speakers of Arabic (first and third grades). Her approach and method are very similar to those of Natasha and Nigel, but to a somewhat modified extent in terms of L1 use. She emphasizes the emotional attachment the children have towards their language and therefore attempts to introduce the new language through the mother tongue. Positive reinforcement is expressed only in the L1 (contrary to Nigel): 'I think that the positive feedback is in Arabic because it touches the heart more.' Rim sees her role as promoting the affective factors, specifically in terms of attitudes and self-confidence when exposing children to the English language in the first grade:

> I don't think that every teacher can teach young learners. It is very important that the first exposure to the language is a fun experience, because if the pupil has an unpleasant experience in learning, he can develop a negative attitude towards the English language.

In terms of her teaching strategies they are geared towards creating a positive attitude towards the TL. She intentionally works on limited vocabulary items combining the teaching with singing, drawing, coloring and cutting activities and a lot of repetitions. She uses English in her teaching and for some of the managerial tasks but L1 use seems essential:

> I use Arabic for two reasons; the first is to make it easier for the pupils to understand the language since I want them to understand what is said during the lesson. The second reason is that there is no choice but to use Arabic. How would the pupils learn the language if I don't use Arabic?

Like the two previous teachers Rim differentiates between language-teaching goals and use in the first versus the third grade. In the first grade the goals are limited to initial exposure and to the development of positive attitudes and self-image, while the goals for older classes are more TL-oriented. Rim also differentiates between her EFL teaching experiences in a Jewish school, where the L1 was less frequently used since English there had the status of a second rather than foreign language, and her current situation.

> Some pupils have been abroad and their parents know English very well. However, here [the Arab school] there is no exposure to English and the parents' knowledge in the English language is little. This obliges me to use more Arabic since it's the only solution to teaching English.

The conclusions she draws regarding the strategies that need to be employed in a limited exposure context are different than those espoused by TL proponents—she opts for more L1 rather than TL use.

Shula, a native Hebrew speaker, differs from the other teachers as she also fulfills the role of homeroom teacher in the Grade 1 class where she teaches English. Like her counterparts she supports early language learning emphasizing the children's curiosity about learning a new language and pride in knowing another language, 'especially English'. Her views regarding L1 use in the YLL class are quite clear: There is a need to use the TL as much as possible but 'exposure to the L2 should be natural'. She states that she makes use of the L1 for facilitating comprehension and handling discipline problems. It is evident that she tries to use the TL as much as possible in asking questions and giving instructions, often employing code-switching strategies: 'I am writing [Hebrew] a number [English]. You say it in English.' Another use of both languages is observed when she translates and repeats the same sentence in both languages. For example: 'Let's say it three times [English]. Let's say it three times [Hebrew]'. Positive feedback is given in the TL ('Thank you! Excellent! Very good! Super sweethearts'), while reprimanding takes place in L1.

It is clear that Shula is well aware of the interests of her students and familiar with their background knowledge in various areas. She relates, for example, to their favorite singers and TV shows. Academically she links the pupils' knowledge to knowledge gained in other subject areas studied in school, such as math and science, and also introduces new concepts through the TL. One such observed example focused on understanding the notion of constructing a model structured according to a color scheme. The kids are activated, sent to the schoolyard to collect color samples. The theoretical concept of a model and its representative features is introduced, and the explanation, instructions and discussion form an L1–TL mixture. The colors used to construct the model are presented by the teacher and students in English. Thus Shula perceives English teaching as a means to access and reinforce content, and gears her linguistic choices towards implementing this approach.

(c)

Mostly TL use

Miri is a Hebrew speaker who has been teaching YLLs for 2 years. She is an avid believer in the benefits of TL exposure regardless of the learners' age: 'I don't think that I should use less English when teaching young learners,' she says. These beliefs are

clearly illustrated in her teaching as she tries to use English as much as possible, rarely mixes the L1 Hebrew with the TL English, repeating language patterns and instructions.

Miri uses some L1 for disciplining, checking comprehension or explaining new material. The lesson is very textbook-focused with partial learner participation. The school is situated in a relatively affluent neighborhood and the kids' exposure to English matches the description provided by Rim previously. It is evident that most of them are familiar with some English words. However, this knowledge is not referred to or utilized in any way.

Unlike Shula, Miri is either unaware of or does not believe in the possibility of linking the TL to other areas, to the children's previous knowledge or their L1. When teaching the fairy tale Goldilocks (which the learners are familiar with in their L1), for example, she explains the origin of the name in English but misses the opportunity to link it to the very same idea (connection to gold) in the Hebrew name.

Eman has Arabic as her mother tongue. She has been teaching English for 15 years and this is the second year for her as a teacher of YLLs. The teaching site is the same as the one where Rim teaches: an Arabic-medium school located in an Arab town. Eman, like Rim, also voices concern as to the lack of exposure to English in the Arabic-speaking environment. Yet, unlike Rim, she deals with the situation by increasing TL use in the EFL classroom and using the children's L1 (Arabic) sparingly:

> It is important to expose the pupils to the English language and to use it as much as possible because it is the most important thing while teaching a foreign language ... I think that the use of Arabic should be done only in certain cases, such as, explaining new material and translating vocabulary.

True to her word she rarely uses Arabic and insists on using English the entire lesson. The pupils are obviously familiar with the question patterns and the repeated instructions used. They are expected to produce sentences in English. When one of the pupils was asked by the teacher 'What do you like? [English]', he answered: 'I like [English] cake [Arabic]', the teacher corrected him 'I like cake [English]'. Eman rejects the idea that the L1 needs to be utilized with young learners for creating empathy towards the language, and for constructing positive relations with the new language and teacher. This she feels can be achieved by 'using activities such as games and songs during the lessons' rather than by employing the L1.

Like her counterparts, Eman is all in favor of early language learning. She seems to be extremely keen on her teaching, enjoys her students ('Young learners are wonderful, they learn faster and they are very excited about the English lesson'), and despite her belief in a monolingual class environment sometimes surrenders to the first language: 'Sometimes when the pupils don't understand what I say in English, I explain it in Arabic'. Interestingly one of the strategies used in order to avoid teacher's L1 use is having a proficient learner act as translator: when one of the children fails to understand TL use the teacher nods to a more able learner who provides the equivalent L1 meaning.

8 Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the linguistic choices of EFL teachers in YLL contexts and the beliefs that underlie them, in comparison with findings established for older learner populations. Though the research is limited in scope, some conclusions can be drawn from the results regarding similarities to patterns described in the literature on older learners. This is evident specifically in terms of the variability in the amount of teachers' L1 use and the functions that the L1 fulfills. However, the findings also point at prominent unique features that typify teachers' instructional choices in the YLL context. These distinct features were found to apply across linguistic and ethnic contexts in both Arabic and Hebrew medium settings.

The amount of L1 use in the EFL YLL classrooms also conforms to previous findings in the sense that it seems to be individualized. However, the teachers' interviews unveiled two significant differences. The first is that, unlike previous research, the teachers in this study seem to be aware of the amount of their L1 use. The second is that decisions whether to engage in massive L1 or TL use seem to be premeditated, grounded in a set of lucid individualized pedagogical maxims of what teaching a language to YLLs should consist of, and what strategies need to be employed. One of these strategies is either expanded or limited L1 use. Teachers who used L1 to a major extent (especially Natasha and Nigel but also Rim) were not apologetic about their practices and did not express remorse or guilt feelings (as was the case in Edstrom, 2006). Rather than viewing L1 use as a shortcoming they recognize the benefits of L1 as a tool in teaching this particular age group, thereby following Levine's (2003) first tenet which affirms the role and marked functions of the learners' L1 in the TL learning process. Conversely, other teachers (Miri and Eman) reject this notion, with Eman providing a more convincing rationale for this rejection. She has developed strategies to cope with the limited TL knowledge that the learners possess, and seems to follow and attain her teaching goals successfully. The teachers engaging in massive L1 use also differentiate between the language use policies for older and younger learners or beginners and more advanced students, a differentiation noted in previous research studies (Crawford, 2004; Levine, 2003). Thus practitioners seem to follow a set teaching agenda in their choices as to when to use the L1 or TL and for what purposes.

Shula, being a homeroom teacher, presents a special case. She perceives the teaching of EFL as part of her general learning teaching program, and the language as a means to access concepts and knowledge and reinforce other subject areas. In her teaching she exploits the children's background knowledge as is recommended in the literature (Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2008). Her familiarity with the children as well as her training as a teacher of YLLs provide her with the necessary teaching tools which some of the other teachers, who meet the children only twice a week, lack.

The comparison between Shula's qualifications and those of the other teachers, as well as the perceived centrality of the L1 in the teaching–learning process, bring up issues concerning teacher education and the knowledge base required for teaching languages to young learners. Who is the ideal teacher in YLL programs? Should it be an expert English teacher? A teacher whose expertise is in teaching young learners? Or perhaps, what seems to be the optimal combination, a language teacher who has training in teaching young learners, or conversely, a young learner teacher who has some training

in EFL (Shohamy & Inbar-Lourie, 2006). In addition, recognition of the centrality of the learners' first language in the learning process implies that the teacher needs to be proficient in that language, a noteworthy reversal of previous assumptions and policies which focused on TL native-speaker knowledge (Medgyes, 1994).

In terms of the Hebrew/Arabic teaching contexts, findings show that the different L1 or ethnic background did not differentiate between the teachers' linguistic practices thus substantiating previous findings (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2005). The fact that differences were found within the same schools with regard to perceptions about the role of L1 and L1 practices (Natasha and Shula, and Rim and Eman), accentuates the individualized decision-making phenomenon noted earlier, which seems to supersede local culture and dominant language considerations.

Finally, should there be a unified framework to determine L1 use as posited by Macaro and Levine? The answer is complex. On the one hand, there is a danger that a top-down framework of predetermined dos and don'ts would simply replace the monolingual dogma, asking teachers to abide by another set of general guidelines regardless of their local teaching context and personal beliefs. On the other hand, seeing that the L1–TL dilemma is so very central to language teaching, and specifically as was shown here to teaching young learners, drawing suggestive guidelines could be useful. The question is who should draw such guidelines and what will be the manner of their implementation.

Since the teachers in this research asserted themselves as professional experts whose actions are guided by their belief systems, they should without doubt be included as active participants in any L1 policy decisions for teaching YLLs. The creation and implementation of guidelines for L1 use in young language learners' classrooms should therefore be perceived as a joint collaborative endeavor, where teachers and other stake-holders engage in an open discussion on issues concerning L1 use and the 'monolingual myth'. Teachers should be encouraged to read the relevant literature, share dilemmas and initiate research on their own practices and those of their colleagues, try out different options and finally reach informed decisions as to the L1 practices suitable for teaching YLL groups in their local context. Such a process will elucidate the issues involved and highlight policy options that pertain to YLL populations.

Future studies will need to look into such processes by researching different language-learning sites, focusing on the role teachers and learners assign to L1 use and the classroom dynamics which ensue. Additionally, not much is known about the students' L1–TL preferences at this young age, and there is a need to find out more about the learners' perspective and include it in the L1 use discussion.

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