

# Monolingualism: an uncongenial policy for Saudi Arabia's low-level learners

*Sulaiman Jenkins*

Remember . . . no Arabic please. No everyday expressions like *kabsa* or *salat*. No *Ramadan*, no *insha Allah*.<sup>1</sup> This is the infamous 'no Arabic' rule here in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), a policy that strictly prohibits L1 usage in the class. Proponents maintain that teachers must be inflexible in prohibiting the use of L1 because L1 usage interferes with L2 acquisition. By being inflexible, teachers facilitate the best English language learning conditions. Interestingly, however, my experience in implementing the policy has convinced me otherwise. In a number of instances, L1 proved to be an asset in class, not a liability. As such, I firmly believe that monolingualism needs to be re-examined in terms of its effect in helping learners develop positive attitudes towards L2, motivating them, and providing them with the basis necessary to build solid foundations.

In debating monolingualism, I am not a pioneer. Dealing with immigrant populations in Massachusetts, Auerbach (1993) raised a number of important issues that L1 usage 'validates the learners' lived experiences' and 'allows . . . for language learning to become a means of communicating ideas rather than an end in itself'. Most recently, Cummins (2009) sounded the call for seriously considering pedagogical strategies which incorporate (not consign to invisibility) students' L1 in the classroom. However, previous debate has tended to mesh all proficiency levels and teaching contexts together (ESL and EFL), whereas I maintain that monolingualism is particularly ineffective in low-level homogeneous (EFL) settings.

Saudi students fresh out of high school face a host of challenges: mastering a foreign language, acquiring proper academic skills, and preparing for an area of study. With regards to mastering a foreign language, monolingualism presents a significant obstacle. From the initial day in English class, students learn that Arabic is not welcomed. In fact, learners are even rewarded or penalized based on their usage of the L1 as the use of L1 is associated with negative classroom behaviour. This type of pedagogical practice has the potential to compromise the way in which students shape their identity (Phillipson 1992: 193). Constantly reprimanding a student for using his/her native language sends the message that L1, and by extension L1 culture, is not welcomed in the class. Languages have strong, inseparable,

and complex ties to culture and insisting on monolingualism essentially means I am asking my students to check their identities and life experiences at the door. In some countries, this approach may be well tolerated. However, in other contexts, exclusive focus on L2 culture can be seen as an English invasion and erosion of local cultural identity (Kubota 2002). Some countries (for example KSA) wish to learn the English language for instrumental purposes while maintaining local heritage and culture (Jenkins 2008). Furthermore, forcing low-level students to attempt to make connections to L2 that are impossible to make once L1 has been banned from the classroom necessarily runs the risk of causing students to lose interest and become demotivated (Dörnyei 2001).

Monolingualism also has the tendency to handicap the learner by removing his/her only way of connecting new L2 information with his/her own life experiences, which are gained and expressed in L1. At lower levels, students' linguistic and/or cultural awareness of L2 is quite limited. Because of these limitations, L1 and L1 culture are the only reference points for them. Under a monolingualist order, if students are presented with new material in L2, they cannot construct a new reality based on their life experiences because their ability to connect L2 experiences with learnt L1 experiences (by using L1) has been stigmatized and proscribed. So in essence, monolingualism impedes the L2 acquisition process by making it difficult for students to make critical connections between the new language and learnt experiences. I have had several instances where rigid subscription to monolingualism (especially when teaching abstract concepts are involved) only exacerbated students' confusion and frustration and weakened their resolve to participate and experiment with the language. English learning within this framework can be quite demotivating as students struggle to make these relationships.

Denying learners access to L1 prevents them from making these crucial linguistic and cultural connections with L2 at critical stages of second language acquisition (SLA). Cummins (2009) posits that 'activation and building on prior knowledge requires the linking of English concepts and knowledge with the learner's L1 cognitive schemata . . . [which] . . . cannot be done effectively if students' L1 is banished from the classroom'. Additionally, Spencer (2003) found 'that being able to briefly seek verification in L1 with a fellow L1 speaker aided [her] learning, and enabled [her] to maintain focus on the lesson'. In these instances, preventing L1 usage has the potential to inhibit learners' abilities to make important linguistic and cultural connections and it also invalidates 'learners' lived experiences'. As such, these products of monolingualism make learning environments less conducive for SLA.

Conversely, subscribing to monolingualism has some merit if the class consists of speakers with different L1s. It is difficult to utilize L1 effectively in a class of this sort. However, a classroom of heterogeneous L1 learners is more particular to ESL settings. Most ESL classrooms are a collection of different nationalities that have converged on an English-speaking country for some purpose. In EFL settings, it is much more likely that the classes will be homogeneous and that most, if not all, students will share the L1. In these circumstances, L1 usage can be a valuable asset for building learner

confidence and motivation and for low-level learners, an important tool by which they can construct new meanings in L2 by activating prior knowledge in L1.

I have argued against the explicit exclusion of L1 from the classroom because there is nothing fundamentally wrong with it in an EFL class. We need to remember that L1 occupies a very important place in our students' lives and perhaps, as Cummins suggests, we need to investigate pedagogical ways of incorporating, not alienating L1. If used effectively in the class, L1 helps to enrich their learning experience and ultimately make the language learning process less daunting than it already is.

#### Note

1 All common Saudi Arabian expressions.

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