EFL Teachers' Use of Learners' L1 in Cycle Two Schools in Oman

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

The current study aims to examine Omani English language teachers' use of their learners' L1 in L2 classrooms. The study takes as to design a mix of qualitative case study and grounded theory research. The participant sample consists of three Omani English male teachers from Cycle Two Schools in Al Dahira Governorate in Oman. Data is collected through interviews and classroom observations. Qualitative content analysis is employed to analyze observations; while Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory is used to analyze the interview data.

The findings of the study reveal that the teachers' use of learners' L1 in the observed classes is significantly high as it is found that the teachers' average use of L1 is 28% of their classroom discourse. However, at the same time, it is found that the teachers have demonstrated a high degree of understanding of the disadvantages of overusing L1; of the optimal amount of L1; and of the different avoidance strategies that minimize the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. Hence, the study concludes that the teachers' shift to L1 is shaped by the challenges they face in their classrooms rather than by their understanding. These challenges are found to be a lack of teaching materials, time constraints, a lack of teaching experience, class size, the learners' low level of proficiency in English, the teachers' lack of training, the types of activities used, and the heavy syllabus.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The design of an English language curriculum in Omani schools, which draws on the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT), advocates the minimization of the use of learners' first language (L1) in order to maximize their exposure to the target language (L2).CLT generally calls for extensive exposure to L2 by providing a comprehensible input [1]. The English Omani curriculum adopts the "maximum exposure" hypothesis, which rests on the premise that the greater the amount of input, the greater the acquisition of the target language, as noted by Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie [2]. Hence, within CLT, classroom activities and tasks are generally geared towards the maximization of the learners' use of L2 [3]. Al-balawi [4] reports that CLT encourages the learners' engagement in various authentic situations and contexts, which could potentially increase their exposure to the target language.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The current study seeks to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To examine how teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms.
2. To examine the factors that influence the teachers' decisions to shift to L1.

Hence, the main research questions that guide the study are:

Research Question 1: How do Omani Cycle Two English language teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms?
Research Question 2: Why do these teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The aim of the present study is to possibly give us more insights into Omani L2 classrooms, in particular into the use of L1. Moreover, the study may potentially raise the awareness of teachers, teacher trainers, and policymakers of this issue. In this respect, this thesis would ultimately provide some recommendations that may help improve the situation of Omani schools.

1.4 Operational Definitions

The current study includes some new concepts, which need to be explained to ensure the readers are familiar with them in the context of this research. Following the analysis of classroom observations, I have coined some new terms and concepts specific to this study. These terms may not have existed in the literature before. The first concept is "classification of shifts to L1", such as the use of words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. In other words, teachers' might shift to L1 by using words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. The second concept is "avoidance strategies", which refers to strategies that are implemented by teachers to avoid shifting to L1, or at least to minimize the use of L1. The third concept is "direct shift to L1", which refers to the use of learners' L1 without trying to implement avoidance strategies.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The design of the study is based on a qualitative case study and grounded theory research. According to Baxter & Jack [5], a qualitative case study is "an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (p. 544). A case study research design is generally suitable for examining people's daily experiences [6]. The case study design is adopted because the current research seeks to examine English language teachers' experiences about the use of learners' L1 in Cycle Two schools in Oman.

Furthermore, a case study research design is suitable to answer descriptive research questions [7], such as the ones formulated in this study. Hence, case study design can help us find answers to "how" and "why" teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms.

Furthermore, the study adopts a grounded theory research design because it attempts to generate theory through the examination of teachers' use of L1 in EFL classrooms in Oman. According to Glaser [8], grounded theory is the systematic development of theory from data. Creswell [9] states that grounded theory is one type of the qualitative research, as he explains:

"Grounded theory designs are systematic, qualitative procedures that researchers use to generate a general explanation that explains a process, action, or interaction among people (p.21)".

2.2 Sampling

Theoretical sampling is a key aspect in grounded theory and case study design. It is employed in the current study to select the participants. In theoretical sampling, the participants are selected based on their experiences with the phenomena under investigation in order to obtain rich data [10]. Thus, three EFL teachers have been selected because they have been experiencing the issue of using L1 in their L2 classrooms. In addition, these teachers have been selected according to their availability and willingness to participate in the current study. They have different teaching experiences. They teach different grades.

In particular, this study is conducted with Omani Cycle Two schools (Grade 5 to 10) in Al Dahira Governorate in the period of the academic year 2016 – 2017.

2.3 Data Collection

For this study, two data collection tools are selected: Classroom observation and interviews. Borg (2006) points out that classroom observation and interviews are often used together to collect descriptions of teaching (as cited in [11]). Three teachers are initially observed to examine how they shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms. Then, the same teachers are after that interviewed to explore further the reasons that underpin their decisions.

2.4 Data Analyses

2.4.1 Analysis of classroom observations

Content analysis is used to analyze data gained from classroom observations. Content analysis is defined as a method where researchers categorize written or oral materials into identified categories of related meanings (Moretti et al., 2011, as cited in [12]). Content analysis generally follows a coding process based on the research questions and the units of analysis. The coding process in qualitative content analysis involves selecting the unit of analysis, categorizing and finding themes from categories. In the present study, instances of shifts to L1, purposes of

using L1, and avoidance strategies are considered of analysis of observations.

A point to mention here is that although the study follows the case study design and analysis for classroom observations, it adopts, however, some quantitative methods in order to quantify any instances of shifts to L1, purposes of using L1, or avoidance strategies that are identified. This quantification of data helps to examine how teachers shift to L1. It also helps to understand the significant use of L1 in lessons. The numerical data is not used to provide any statistical analysis, but only to guide the qualitative analysis.

2.4.2 Analysis of the interviews

To analyze the interview data, the study uses Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory model. This model is appropriate to the qualitative research design that the study embraces. A constructivist grounded theory model focuses on the analysis of individuals' values, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences [9].

3. RESULTS

3.1 Results from the Analysis of Classroom Observations

The analysis of classroom observations attempts to answer Research Question 1: How do Omani Cycle Two English language teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms? Three teachers are each observed twice. The teachers T1, T2, and T3 teach Grades 6, 7, and 5 respectively. For the purposes of analysis, I have merged the results of both lessons as no discrepancy between the results of either lessons s are observed, except in Section 3.1.1.

In addition to this, the data are grouped according to three levels of analysis: the teachers' L1 use versus L2 (in Section 3.1.1), the analysis of various communicative functions underpinning the teachers' shift to L1 (in Section 3.1.2), and the analysis of teachers' use of avoidance strategies (in Section 3.1.3).

3.1.1 Teachers' L1 use versus L2

In this section, the frequency of the teachers' L1 use is investigated against the frequency of their L2 use. The purpose from this is to quantify the amount of L1 use in L2 settings, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' L1 and L2 use

Teacher	Lesson/Observation	L1 %	L2 %
T1	One	40	60
T1	Two	26	74
T2	One	27	73
T2	Two	24	76
T3	One	25	75
T3	Two	27	73
	Average	28.16	71.83

* T: Teacher

As can be seen in Table 1, teacher T1's classroom discourse in lesson one is 40% of L1 whereas it is 60% of L2. The same teacher (T1) used 26% of L1 in his lesson two against 74% of L2. Teacher T2, on the other hand, used 27% of L1 versus 73% of L2 in his lesson one, whereas in lesson two he used 24% of L1 versus 76% of L2. Teacher T3 used 25% of L1 versus 75% of L2 in his first lesson one, while he used 27% of L1 versus 73 % of L2 in lesson two.

The above results indicate that teachers T1, T2 and T3 are somewhat similar in their practices when it comes to using of L1 in their L2 classrooms, except one instance where T1 used 40% of L1, which can be considered high since it represents half of his classroom discourse. This goes against the instructions of in the Omani curriculum, which advocate a limited use of the learners' L1 to maximize exposure to the target language L2.

In fact, the first level of analysis reveals that the average use of L1 in the six observed lessons is 28%. Hence, we can conclude that the amount of L1 use by all the three teachers is to a certain extent high, which potentially minimizes the learners' opportunities for exposure to L2.

3.1.1.1 Classification of shifts to L1

The analysis also reveals that teachers shift to either words, phrases, sentences, or chunks (paragraphs) during their lessons. However, they tend to vary in the frequency they shift to each type. Table 2 illustrates the types of shifts and their frequency.

As Table 2 shows, the teachers tend to shift to L1 using words: 10 times for T1, 16 times for T2, and 30 times for T3. Shifting to words is different from shifting to phrases, sentences, and chunks as it is less detrimental than other types because it requires less use of L1. The table also shows

that the teachers shift to L1 using sentences more frequently than the other types: 87 times for T1, 73 times for T2, and 98 times for T3. It is good to note that the Omani curriculum invites teachers to use English in class as much as possible, which generally implies a restricted use of L1. However, the results demonstrate that the teachers frequently shift to sentences, resulting in a considerable amount of L1 use versus a minimum amount of L2.

3.1.2 Communicative purposes for shifting to L1

This section looks at the communicative purposes behind the teachers' shift to L1 to identify the needs to use L1 in their L2 classrooms. It also helps us to understand the frequency of this use in the observed classes. Table 3 presents the purposes and their frequency.

Table 3 indicates that teachers shift to L1 to ten different communicative purposes.

3.1.3 Avoidance strategies versus direct shifts to L1

The use of avoidance strategies in L2 classrooms generally minimize the use of learners' L1. Table 4 below illustrates the use of avoidance strategies versus direct shifts to L1 in the observed lessons. This can help us understand the teachers' practices concerning L1 versus L2 use.

Table 2. Types of shifts to L1

Type of shift to L1	T1	T2	T3
Words	10	16	30
Phrases	4	0	0
Sentences	87	73	98
Chunks (paragraphs)	0	0	0

Table 3. Teachers' purposes for using L1

Purposes for using L1	T1	T2	T3
Greeting	2	2	2
Explaining grammar	4	0	0
Clarification	9	8	7
Explaining vocabulary	8	10	7
Checking to understand	10	5	16
Class control and discipline	4	7	6
Assigning homework	2	1	0
Checking attendance	0	1	1
Providing feedback	1	8	5
Giving instructions	22	11	18

Table 4. Avoidance strategies versus direct shifts to L1

Teachers	Direct shifts to L1	Use of avoidance strategies
T1	95	4
T2	85	2
T3	121	4

Table 4 shows that the teachers use L1 more often and that they rarely use avoidance strategies. T1 directly shifts to L1 (95 times) and only uses four avoidance strategies (4 times). T2 directly shifts to L1 (85 times) whereas he only uses only two avoidance strategies (2 times). T3 directly shifts to L1 (121 times) using only four avoidance strategies (4 times). Thus, all the teachers use avoidance strategies less frequently, while they directly shift to L1 more often. This seems to happen despite the fact that the Omani English curriculum strongly encourages teachers to use avoidance strategies in their classrooms.

This may imply that there exist some factors that prevent teachers from employing avoidance strategies in their classrooms. The following section discusses in more detail these avoidance strategies.

3.1.3.1 The use of avoidance strategies by the teachers

This section examines the use of avoidance strategies by the observed teachers. Table 5 illustrates the types of avoidance strategies used.

3.2 Results from the Analysis of Interviews

Interviews are conducted to establish whether the teachers' understanding of shifts to L1 in L2 classrooms does influence their teaching practices.

For the purposes of the analysis of interview data, Charmaz's inductive constructivist grounded theory is used. Hence, the main themes that emerged from the process of analysis are shown in Fig. 1.

According to Fig. 1, two main themes have emerged from the data: teachers' understanding, and challenges. The first main theme involves three subthemes, which are: (1a) the disadvantages of shifting to L1, (1b) the optimal amount, and (1c) the use of avoidance strategies. The second main theme consists of eight subthemes which are: (2a) time constraints, (2b) a heavy syllabus, (2c) lack of teaching experience, (2d) lack of training, (2e) lack of educational aids, (2f) class size, (2g) type of the classroom activities, and (2h) learners' low proficiency.
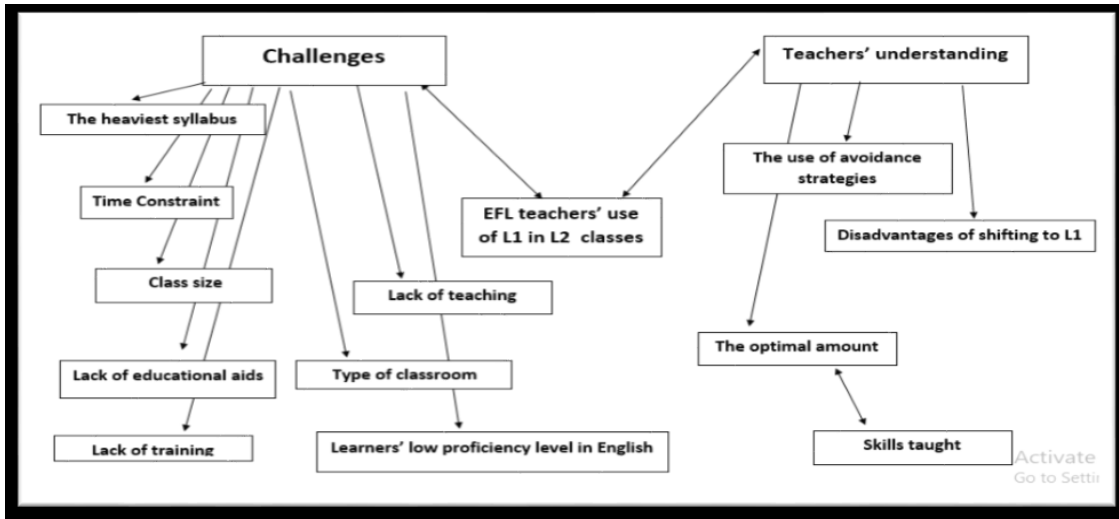
Table 5. Avoidance strategies versus direct shifts to L1

Type of strategy	T1	T2	T3
Using synonyms	1	0	0
Providing examples	1	2	1
Drawing	0	0	3
Using pictures	1	0	0
Miming	1	0	0
Total	4	2	4

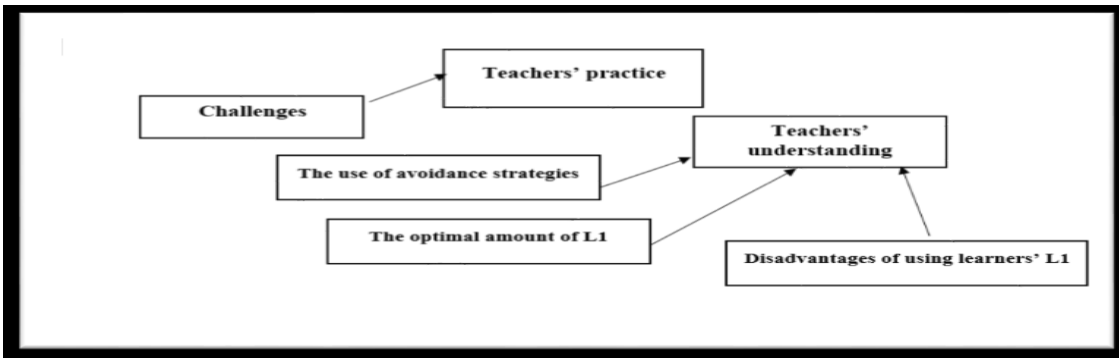**Fig. 1. Main themes emerging from interview analysis**

Fig. 2. The relationship between teachers' understanding, challenges and practices

The analysis of the interview data has generated many themes. Exploring whether they are aware of avoidance strategies, the teachers report that they tend to use many in their classrooms including miming, drawing, using realia, using simple language, using gestures, using synonyms and antonyms, simplifying the instruction, providing examples, and using body language and facial expressions. It is evident that the teachers have sufficient knowledge of these types of avoidance strategies, although the findings from the classroom observations show that the teachers rarely use these strategies in practice. In relation to the teachers' understanding of the optimal amount of L1 use, the interviews reveal that the teachers recognize that L1 should be kept to the minimum in their L2 classrooms. However, in actual practice, the findings from their classroom observations demonstrate that the average use of L1 is 28% in their lessons. Therefore, it can be argued that the teachers tend to shift frequently to L1 despite

their understanding of the optimal amounts of L1 use in L2 classrooms. It is also found that the teachers' decisions are shaped by the difficulties and challenges they face in their classrooms. The findings reveal that the teachers tend to shift to L1 because of time constraints, a heavy syllabus, the learners' low proficiency in L2, the types of activities, the lack of teaching experience, the lack of teaching materials, class size, and the lack of training.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings Related to Research

Question 1

To find answers to Research Question 1, classroom observations are conducted. The discussion in this section is organized have emerged from the analysis of observation data. These themes are L1 versus L2 use, purposes

underlying teachers' shifts to L1, and use of avoidance strategies.

4.1.1 L1 versus L2 use

From the analysis of classroom observations, it is found that the teachers' average use of L1 is 28% of the teachers' classroom discourse. The findings do not correlate with studies such as the one by many researchers [13] and [14], which have found that the average use of L1 is 8.8%, 11.3%, and 15.2% respectively. Furthermore, the findings in this study show that the teachers have mostly shifted to sentences when using L1, which has resulted in significant use of L1 in the observed lessons. It can be concluded that the amount of L1 used by the three teachers is high, which minimizes the learners' opportunities for exposure to L2. These results also contradict what the literature generally argues. Brown [15] for instance states that only a minimal shift to learners' L1 is acceptable. Du [16] asserts that the shift to L1 should be minimized as much as possible.

4.1.2 Purposes underlying teachers shift to L1

The findings also reveal that the teachers shift to L1 in order to fulfil different purposes, which explains the significant use of L1 observation data. Teachers in this study shift to L1 to give instructions, to check understanding, to provide clarification, to check attendance, to explain grammar, to explain vocabulary, to maintain class control, to assign homework, to provide feedback, and to greet learners. These findings seem to correlate with many studies such as the ones discussed in many researchers [17-19]. The findings in this study also show some common purposes as the teachers mostly shift to L1 to check understanding and to give instructions. This goes in line with the findings of studies by De & Nassaji [13], and Macaro [14], who note that teachers mostly shift to L1 to check understanding and to instruct their learners. Hence, it can be argued that the teachers in this study tend to shift to L1 to fulfil different communicative purposes, which may explain the significant amount of L1 used.

4.1.3 Use of avoidance strategies

The classroom observations further demonstrate that the three teachers have made limited attempts to use avoidance strategies such as miming, drawing, providing examples, using synonyms, and using pictures. The literature generally contends that EFL teachers should

provide learners with comprehensible L2 input [1] to enhance their second language acquisition. Khati [20] states that teachers should implement different strategies that reduce the shift to L1 in L2 classes. Despite the fact that [21] strongly encourages teachers to employ avoidance strategies, the findings reveal that the teachers tend to shift directly to L1 in L2 classroom.

4.2 Findings Related to Research Question 2

To find answers to Research Question 2, interviews are conducted with the same teachers. The purpose of the interviews is to explore why teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms. The current section is organized around the main themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interviews, which are: teachers' understanding and challenges.

4.2.1 Teachers' understanding

The findings from interviews reveal that the teachers understand that there are many disadvantages of shifting to L1. Similar findings are reported by many researchers [22,23], and [24] who have found that shifting to L1 deprives learners from L2 exposure, which is detrimental to their L2 learning and acquisition. Furthermore, [25 has found that using L1 makes learners more over-reliant on communicating in this language, and in consequence, they would not be able to communicate using L2. Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney [26] have also found that using L1 can be a demotivating factor for learners. It can be concluded therefore that although the teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the dangers of using L1 in their classrooms, they nevertheless shift to L1 frequently, at least in the observed lessons.

In addition to this, the findings of interviews reveal that teachers understand that the use of L1 should be kept to the minimum, whereas the findings of the classroom observations reveal that the average use of L1 is 28%. Therefore, it can be concluded that despite the teachers' good understanding of the acceptable amount of L1 use in their L2 classrooms, they tend to shift to L1 at a significant rate. These findings are in line with what [27] has found, i.e., that teachers' understanding concerning the optimal amount of L1 is not in line with their actual teaching practices.

In terms of the use of avoidance strategies, the teachers report that there are many avoidance

strategies that minimize the use of L1. These findings are consistent with what is discussed in many researchers [28,29,30,31]. For instance, [28] states that there are many strategies to avoid shifting to L1 in L2 classrooms, such as using synonyms and antonyms, miming, and gestures. Nevertheless, although again the findings from interviews show that teachers have sufficient understanding of the different avoidance strategies, the findings from classroom observations show that the teachers rarely employ these strategies in their actual teaching. Therefore, it is concluded that there are some factors that from implementing avoidance strategies in their L2 classrooms, which ultimately influence their decisions to shift significantly to L1.

4.2.2 Challenges

The three teachers report that they experience several challenges that make them draw heavily on L1 to fulfil their teaching duties. These findings are compatible with [32] and [33] who have found that teachers' lack of training leads them to shift to L1. Moreover, [27] has found that time constraints, skills taught, and learners' low proficiency in L2 are the main factors that determine the teachers' decisions to shift to their learners' L1. Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney [26] who has found that the learners' low d lack of teaching experience generally influence s the teachers' decisions to shift to L1. Song and Andrews [34] also have found that time constraints and students' abilities are the major factors that shape teachers' decisions to shift to L1. Similarly, [19] and [35] have found that class size, time constraints, and the types of activities play a significant role in forcing teachers to shift to their learners' L1.

To better understand the teachers' practices regarding the use of L1 in their classrooms, it is important to explore the relationship between the teachers' understanding, the challenges they face, and their practices, which is summarized as follows in Fig. 2.

According to figure 2, the teachers' practices regarding the use of L1 are not influenced by the lack of their understanding of the disadvantages of using learners' L1, or the use of avoidance strategies, or the optimal amount of L1 in L2 classes, but by the challenges they face in their L2 classrooms. Hence, it can be concluded challenges may represent the major obstacle to the teachers' exclusive use of L2 in their classrooms.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of the Study

This study is directed by the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do Omani Cycle Two English language teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms?

Research Question 2: Why do these teachers shift to L1 in their L2 classrooms?

To answer these two research questions, the study uses classroom observations and interviews to collect data. Classroom observations are intended to help us find answers to the first research question, whereas interviews are used to find answers to the second research question.

Analysis of classroom observation data reveals a number of interesting findings. First, although, the Omani English curriculum encourages teachers to use English in class as much as possible, it is found that the average amount of teachers' use of L1 is 28% of their classroom discourses, which is considered high since it minimizes the learners' opportunities to exposure to L2. Second, it is found that the teachers rely heavily on L1 to fulfil different communicative purposes. This also explains the significant use of L1 in the observed lessons. Third, it is found that teachers often make limited attempts to use avoidance strategies in their lessons.

The findings from the analysis of interview data reveal that the teachers demonstrate a good understanding of the disadvantages of shifting to L1. They understand that using L1 usually minimizes their learners' opportunities for exposure to L2, which can, in turn, impede their acquisition and can consequently proficiency in L2. They also understand that using L1 can lead to the learners' excessive dependency on L1 and their over-reliance on the teachers to communicate with them in L1. The teachers further understand that using L1 can be a demotivating factor for their learners. However, if they have to use L1, the teachers understand that the amount should be kept to the strict minimum within the optimal amount allowed. Finally, it is also found that the teachers have sufficient understanding of the different avoidance strategies that can be employed to minimize the use of L1. However, it is found that the teachers significantly shift to L1 in practice. It

is therefore concluded that there are many factors that seem to influence the teachers' decisions to shift to L1.

As a core theory for this study, we can, therefore, argue that the teachers' practices regarding the use of L1 are not influenced by their lack of understanding of the disadvantages of using L1, of the optimal amount of L1, of the different avoidance strategies, but their practices are shaped by these challenges that the teachers face in their L2 classrooms.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Some recommendations for future n be made. First, similar studies could be conducted for instance in Cycle One Schools (Grades 1 to 4) and Post Basic Schools (Grades 11 and 12) in Oman, which might possibly give different findings. Second, other studies could be conducted with a major focus on gender differences to explore whether a shift to L1 in L2 classrooms varies between EFL male and female teachers. Third, researchers in Oman could review the findings of this study and build on these to conduct further studies that involve a larger sample towards developing more understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, other studies could be carried out to explore the learners' use of L1 in L2 classrooms in order to understand the issue from the learners' perspective.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
http://www.sdiarticle3.com/review-history/47413