
They're Listening but They Can't Hear Me: Reflections of Native English Teachers in a Saudi Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Classroom discipline, achieved through effective classroom management, is a fundamental requirement for the facilitation of learning. There are different classroom management strategies that teachers employ in order to manage their classrooms. These strategies are utilized by native and non native English teachers alike. However, using the students' mother tongue is something which is not accessible to all teachers. This research investigates whether the use of the students' mother tongue by the teacher is a significant tool for fostering classroom management. The research offers an insight into the perceptions of both native English language teachers and non-native English language teachers working in a primary school in Saudi Arabia, and examines the perceived advantages and disadvantages vis-à-vis classroom management and the use of Arabic. The paper sheds some light on the issues and challenges facing native English language teachers, and provides scope for further research in this critical area.

Keywords: ESL, EFL, classroom management, native, non-native, ELT

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of classroom management, in relation to student achievement, cannot be understated.

Good classroom management is what makes it possible to teach effectively. Without an orderly, purposeful environment, educators cannot establish a classroom climate that fosters learning and collaboration. (Bruhn, Lane, Menzies, Crnabori, 2011, p.14)

A wide ranging meta-analysis (Wang, Haertel, Walberg: 1994) identified classroom management as the single most important factor governing student learning. The absence of classroom management is pernicious to student achievement, affecting grades, and results on standardized tests (Shinn, Tindal & Spira, 1987). While "classroom management does not equate with good teaching...it is the open door that good teaching must walk through to establish itself in a classroom" (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2007, p.67). Hence, the topic is pertinent for educators, and cited as the area where teachers seek the most assistance (Rose & Gallup, 2005). Before any meaningful discussion can proceed, it is important to define the term classroom management for the purpose of this study.

The definition of classroom management has evolved over time. Traditionally, classroom management was concerned primarily with classroom discipline. As Doyle (1986) purports, classroom management is the progression of strategies teachers utilize to maintain order. Due to this, the terms classroom management and discipline are often interchangeable (Bellon, Bellon & Blank: 1992). However, the definition has become broader to include "the actions teachers take

to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning” (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006 p.4). For the purpose of this research the term classroom management will focus on discipline in the classroom. The research is concerned with whether using Arabic in the classroom aids the teachers’ attempts to keep discipline in their classes, and limit unwanted disruptions. It is therefore not focused on the myriad other facets of classroom management.

The significance of this research could be far reaching. However, the research would have to be developed further in order to draw more concrete conclusions. The research may identify a trend, which could then be explored further. With the strong relationship between classroom discipline and student achievement, if non-native teachers are better suited to create an environment conducive to learning, this may cause a rethink of recruitment policy.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

This exploratory study was triggered by a phenomenon that I witnessed while doing classroom observations of primary school English teachers in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it stems from my experience of being a native English teacher working in a primary school in Saudi Arabia. During the observations a pattern of behavioural problems became apparent in the classes of the native English language teachers. In contrast, the non-native English language teachers did not face such problems. There are numerous possible reasons for this, and the aim of this initial study is to determine whether the use of Arabic in the classroom is a contributory factor.

As is the case in many parts of the world, English native speakers are highly sought after in Saudi Arabia. Many job advertisements exclusively ask for native speaker applicants. This preference is sometimes reflected in salaries where disparities can be seen in institutions where native and non native English teachers work side by side. Recruiters may point to various research to justify this preference. As Sutherland (2012, p.58) purports, “native English speakers are often claimed to be better language teachers than non-native English speakers.” Native English teachers are said to provide the best model of the target language (Cook, 1999; Mahboob, 2004), whereas non native English teachers sometimes lack the linguistic competence to instruct entirely in English (Hyde, 2002). It has also been posited that native English language teachers use the most up-to-date and effective English language teaching methods (Honey, 1997; Quirk, 1990). These arguments have been countered (Lee, 2000; Mahboob, 2004; Milambiling, 2000). However, the main point here is that if native Arabic speaking teachers are better suited to create an environment conducive to learning, perhaps this should be given more weight than the perceived benefits that native English speaking teachers bring. I have witnessed parents come to school and complain that their child’s English teacher is a non native, while other children have a native English teacher. If subsequent studies revealed that the problems facing native English language teachers is ubiquitous, parents may themselves rethink their preferences.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the importance of classroom management there has been a lot of research on the topic. This research has highlighted essential aspects of classroom management. Doyle (1986) stresses the link between classroom management and instructional strength. Thus, effective classroom management depends on “the strength and durability of the primary program, or vector of action” (p.393). If students are engaged in the planned scheme of work there is little room for disruption. Wong and Wong (2005) emphasise the importance of creating a classroom

environment which is task orientated, predictable, and consistent. As Crocker and Brooker (1986: p. 10) state, “higher achievement is attained in classrooms that function in a businesslike manner, under high teacher direction, with a minimum of lost time or task disruption.” The management of interventions has also been highlighted as an important aspect of classroom management. Frequent reprimands has been reported as ineffective (Fisher et. al, 1980). Fisher et. al. (1980) recommend instead that teachers “check to see that tasks are not too hard for the student, increase the clarity and emphasis with which expectations are stated and the consistency with which students are held accountable, or increase the amount of substantive interactive instruction” (p.28). Hosford (1984) states the importance of establishing clear objectives for the students. In a well managed class, “The students are so busy at task-related activities, following sensible routines, and striving toward clearly understood objectives, that situations with which teachers must "cope" seldom have an opportunity to arise” (p.145).

There is a plethora of research on classroom management and the preservice teacher (Martin, 2004: Putman, 2009, Zuckerman, 2007: Stoughton, 2007). However, none of these studies focused on the foreign language teacher. These studies raised preservice teachers’ concerns about the lack of focus on classroom management training. Putman (2009) stresses how this deficiency in training causes teachers to “feel a significant amount of trepidation in matters of classroom management” (p.234). Horwitz (2005) outlined some classroom management strategies for foreign language teachers. However, her research did not focus on the use of the students’ mother tongue as a means to aid classroom management.

In a great deal of research on foreign language teaching, issues of classroom management remain peripheral, and tend to focus more on different strategies in the TEFL classroom. “Classroom management is the central element of every teacher’s daily professional experience, but it is a neglected topic in debates on language education” (Wright, 2005, p.1). Other research focuses on the use of the students’ mother tongue, but for other purposes. For example, Wilkerson’s study (2008) focuses on the use of the students’ mother tongue in the classroom for time management purposes.

There is, however, some research that shows that teachers code-switch in an attempt to control the learning environment. In a study researching code-switching behaviour by two teachers, conducted by Kim & Elder (2008) one of the teachers stated that code-switching “was necessary to keep the class on task and to ensure adequate coverage of the lesson content” (p181). Tien’s study (2009) demonstrated how English language teachers in Taiwan would switch back to the students’ mother tongue in order to regain control of the class, and discipline the students. Bateman’s study (2008) acknowledges that the general trend in teaching language methodology is to try to limit the use of the student’s mother tongue. This is for linguistic reasons, such as increasing the exposure of the target language to the students. However, teachers’ fear of losing control of the class was the main reason cited for them using the students’ mother tongue.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

The central question that this research looked to answer was: *Is the use of the students’ mother tongue advantageous vis-à-vis classroom management in a TEFL classroom in a primary school in Jeddah?*

5. METHODOLOGY

This is a small scale first stage exploratory study, which looks to discover a possible trend which could be examined further in subsequent research. The study looks at the perceptions of two native English language teachers and two non-native English language teachers in a primary school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I opted to use a semi-structured interview as my research tool. Using a semi-structured interview allowed me to enter the interview with several key questions, but also allowed me “to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Gill et al., 2008, p.291). The semi-structured interview afforded me much flexibility. As Beardsworth & Keil (1992) state about their use of semi-structured interviews, “the open-ended discursive nature of the interviews permitted an interactive process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier interviewees could be taken up and presented to later interviewees” (p.261-2). The use of a semi-structured interview allowed me to probe deeper into the initial responses of the respondent to gain a more detailed answer to the question. (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997, p.156)

Participant observation was another viable research tool to be used. However as Wardhaugh (2006) states, “...how can you obtain objective data from the real world without injecting your own self into the data and thereby confounding the results before you even begin? How can you be sure that the data you have collected are uncontaminated by the process of investigation itself?” (p. 153). My study concerns primary school children. It is likely that their behaviour would change once a person unknown to them entered the classroom. It was possible to conduct participant observation without the students’ knowledge, using apparatus such as video cameras. However, this would have raised great ethical issues.

The research was piloted with four English teachers; two native speakers of English (Ali and Khalid), and two native Arabic speakers (Ahmad & Faisal). I decided against a group interview with many participants, or interviewing the four participants together, as I felt that this would affect their responses. What occurs in someone’s classroom can be a cause of embarrassment, thus a respondent may not have spoken freely if his colleagues were present. As Robson highlights “group dynamics or power hierarchies affect who speaks and what they say” (Robson, p.241). A discussion on how the four participants were chosen for the study will follow later.

The interviews were conducted face to face rather than over the phone. This was largely due to the fact that with telephone interviews “the lack of visual cues may cause problems in interpretation” (Robson, p.241). During the interviews notes were taken “to keep a written record of non-verbal behaviours where these may be essential to a full and accurate transcription” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.47). Thus “gestures or facial expressions that suggest strong emotions” (King & Horrocks, p.48) were recorded. Before the interviews were carried out, an interview guide consisting of eight questions was written. The guide contained issues that I wanted the participant to cover, however I fully expected the participants’ responses to generate further questions. The interview guide was given to two teachers at my university who are independent of my research. The first was a native English speaker, and the second was a non-native English speaker. They both affirmed that the questions were clear and would be easily understood.

5.1 The Participants

To pilot the research two native and two non-native speakers of English were interviewed. They all came from the English department of a private school in Jeddah, which consists of 18 English teachers; 12 non-native English speakers, and 6 native speakers. The participants were not chosen using random sampling. “The process of selecting a random sample is well defined and rigorous” (Marshall, 1996, p.523). However, it “is not the most effective way of developing an understanding of complex issues relating to human behaviour” (Marshall, 1996, p.523). Marshall (1996) elaborates further on the reasons for this in his article. Essentially, “qualitative researchers recognize that some informants are ‘richer’ than others and that these people are more likely to provide insight and understanding for the researcher” (p.523). Subsequently, I chose two native and two non native English teachers from the primary stage that had been teaching at the school for a number of years.

Before conducting the interviews I contacted the four participants and made them aware of the nature of the study. I also gave them assurances about ethical practices such as confidentiality and anonymity. “This gives respondents some idea of what to expect from the interview, increases the likelihood of honesty and is also a fundamental aspect of the informed consent process” (Gill et al., 2008, p.292). The participants had no objections to being audio recorded, however they did object to being video recorded, hence my decision to take observational notes.

6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Discussions about ethical principles in social research were grouped by Diener & Crandall (1978) into four main areas, namely; harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception. To avoid harming the participants during the study, I ensured that all records were kept confidential. The participants’ real names were not used in the paper. The school was also given anonymity. As Bryman (2012) notes, “the use of pseudonyms is a common recourse, but may not eliminate entirely the possibility of identification” (p.133). However, as much as possible was done to keep the identities of the participants private.

As Bryman (2012) states “covert observation transgresses that principle (of information being given to participants), because participants are not given the opportunity to refuse to cooperate” (p.138). I ensured that the participants were given full information about the nature and purpose of my research, and they were able to make an informed decision as to whether they wished to participate.

“The right of privacy is a tenet that many of us hold dear, and transgressions of that right in the name of research are not regarded as acceptable” (Bryman, p.142). As a result, I opted not to use hidden cameras to observe the students’ behaviour. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ houses, and this was their wish. Thus, there were no infringements upon the privacy of my participants.

7. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The research question was piloted with four participants, and their interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The participants’ interviews were first transcribed verbatim. Initial codes were then manually produced for the data, before the codes were sorted into potential themes. These codes were gathered through open coding, and then axial coding. Figure 1 shows

the thematic map for the native English teachers (Ali & Khalid). Figure 2 shows the thematic map for the non-native English teachers (Ahmad & Faisal).

Figure 1: Thematic map for Ali & Khalid

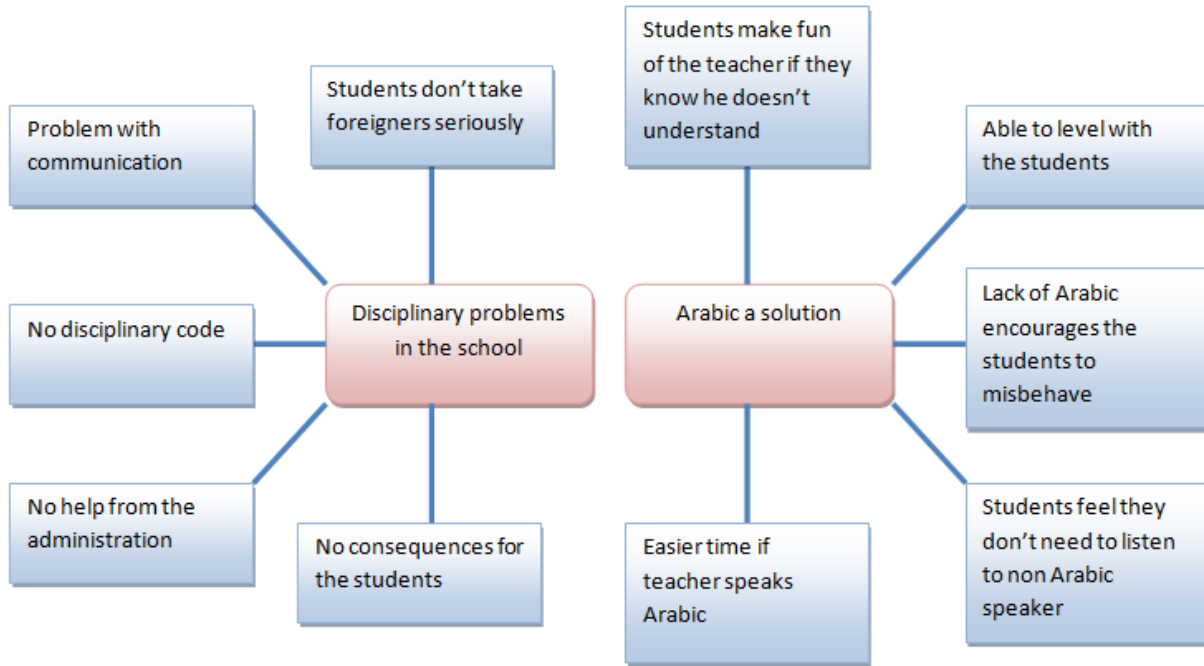
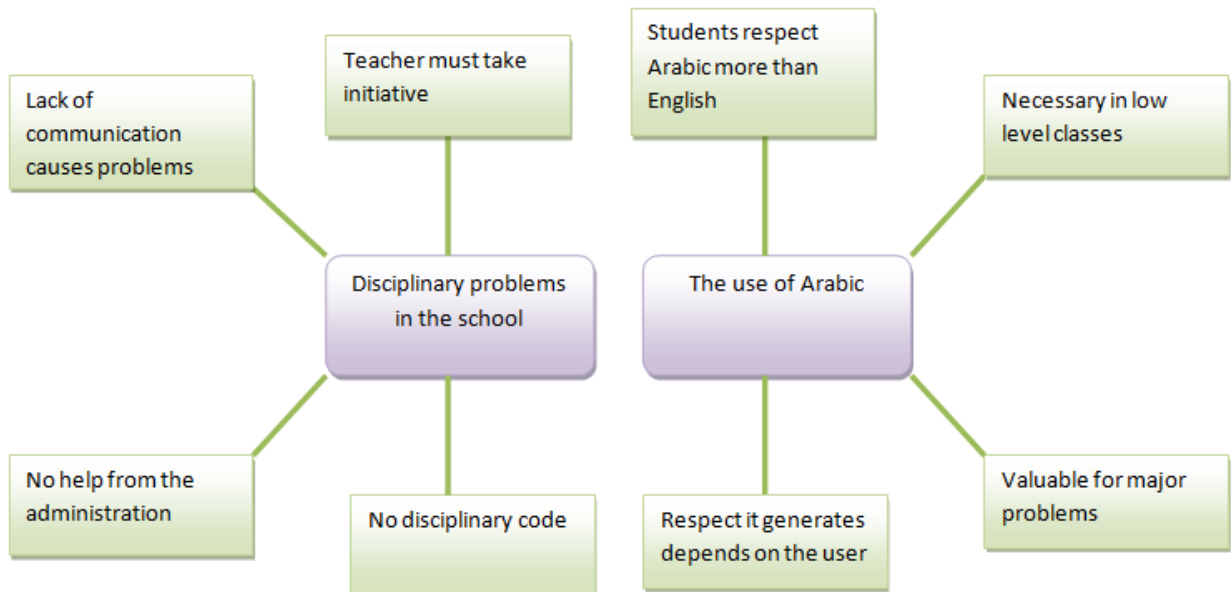


Figure 2: Thematic map for Ahmad & Faisal



Disciplinary Problems in the School:

All four of the participants opined that there were disciplinary problems in the school. They lamented the lack of a disciplinary code which left teachers feeling they had to make their own code. The participants expressed a feeling of abandonment from the administration of the school.

Partial Transcription of interview with Ali (native English language teacher)

Interviewer So, if you find—If you see a student misbehaving in the class, what’s your first course of action?

Ali Ask the kid to sit and behave himself.

Interviewer Aha

Ali And that’s about it, you can’t do anything else. If he refuses, then he refuses. You can’t kick him out of the classroom. There’s no one to send him to. And if there is a student counselor to send him to, he comes back with candy, and rewards. (Laughter)

Interviewer (Laughter) Yeh.

Ali So, there’s not really a set discipline code for kids in my school.

Lack of Arabic a Contributory Factor to the Disciplinary Problems:

Both of the native speakers, Ali and Khalid, expressed that not being able to speak Arabic caused problems for them in their classes. Ali stated that he believes he “would have a much better time controlling his class if he were fluent in Arabic.” Moreover, he believes that because he is not an Arabic speaker “it encourages them (his students) to misbehave.” The students “laugh and poke fun at the teacher because...they can say things that (Ali is) not able to understand.” Ali said;

“I find communication to be an obstacle, for me, who is a non Arabic speaker, to discipline my kids.”

Khalid stressed his belief that his lack of Arabic is an obstacle with regards to communication in the classroom.

Partial Transcription of interview with Khalid (native English language teacher)

Interviewer Do you believe that communication is an obstacle to discipline in your classroom?

Khalid Yes. Definitely. I do feel that it is a barrier to discipline in the class. I’ve seen many times when an Arabic teacher or a non native English teacher who can speak Arabic gives instructions. He’s able to say a command in Arabic and the student complies straight away. Whereas, there have been times when I’m in the class and I give an instruction and I have to repeat something five or ten times to the students and it’s not complied with whereas another teacher may just walk into the class, and they’re talking the students and the teacher will just say-tell them to be quiet in Arabic and they understand it, and they comply straight away.

Easier Time if the Teacher Speaks Arabic:

All four of the participants acknowledged that a teacher who speaks Arabic has an easier time managing his class. Ahmad, the native Arabic speaker, stated that the use of Arabic in the class depended on the level of the students, stating that it is not necessary in high level classes, but he admitted that even for the high level students he would use Arabic if he had “a major issue.” This is because he believed ‘they listen to you in Arabic more’. In low level classes Ahmad pointed to the necessity of using Arabic, stating that if he were to speak English he would effectively be speaking to himself.

Ahmad made an interesting point that the students respect towards the Arabic speaker depends on who the speaker is. “They respect the Arabic speakers more than they do natives, even if the native speaker speaks some Arabic.” Moreover, Ahmad opined that the students respect for the Arabic speaker also depends on where the teacher is from, with the most respected being afforded to a Saudi teacher, or someone who looks Saudi. This opinion is something that would need to be explored if the study were to be developed further, to see whether the advantage of using Arabic is limited to native speakers of Arabic, and whether it is greater for Saudi teachers.

Ali believes that being able to speak Arabic is advantageous. He said;

“I would have a much better time controlling my class if I were fluent in Arabic, or if I were a native Arabic speaker.”

He added that students take advantage of the fact that he doesn’t speak Arabic. Ali stated that;

“They feel like they don’t have to listen to me because everything I say to them is funny and they don’t take it serious.”

Khalid stated how not being able to use Arabic impacts upon his class time. It “takes a long time” at the start of lessons to get the students focused, and he “has to exert more energy.” In contrast, he said that when a teacher speaks Arabic his instructions are carried out “within seconds.” Khalid said;

“By the time the class is ready, ten minutes of the class has already gone, so that affects students’ learning, their learning time..umm...you know...all these things”

Faisal stated that when dealing with a disciplinary problem in a low level class “the best thing is to convert to Arabic and describe the problem.” This is because when he speaks English the students say, “Teacher you are shouting, but we don’t understand what you are saying.” However, he acknowledges the negative effect of using Arabic with regards to language acquisition. His students prefer to converse with him in Arabic and therefore don’t get the practice that they require.

Partial Transcription of interview with Faisal (non native English language teacher)

Interviewer Do you believe that if you couldn't speak Arabic you would have a more difficult time controlling your class?

Faisal I can say a big yes. Arabic helps me a lot to tell my students about a behavioural problem. I know-I think it's going to be a big problem really if I couldn't speak Arabic. I know-I have a friend who is from Britain. Sometimes he uses me just to come to his class and tell them- to say the rules and procedures in erm..Arabic for the students to behave well inside the classroom. So, you know, compared between me and him, yes, my British friend he has lots of trouble dealing with his students, so let's say..dealing with behavioural problems inside the classroom. And I think that dealing- to answer the problem in Arabic helped me a lot.

Partial Transcription of interview with Ahmad (non native English language teacher)

Interviewer What effect do you think it has on the students, you know, the reality that you speak the same mother tongue as them? What effect do you think that has on the students from the beginning?

Ahmad Well it has some effect. You know, they respect the—they respect the Arabic speakers more than they do natives. Even if the native speakers speak some Arabic. And another level is, they respect a Saudi, or someone looks like a Saudi.... more than they do, other Arabs.

The answer to the research question, according to the teachers' perceptions appears to be yes, using Arabic in the classroom is advantageous vis-à-vis classroom management.

8. CONCLUSION

This pilot study looked to discover a possible theme which could be explored further in subsequent studies. From the interviews conducted it would appear that the use of Arabic by the teacher is advantageous vis-à-vis classroom management. This appears to be due to the respect that it generates in the students, as well as the fact that the students immediately understand what the teacher requires of them.

However, in order to verify the veracity of such a claim the research would need to be expanded further. Firstly, for any claim to be generalizable the study would need to incorporate a much larger sample, consisting of teachers teaching across different age groups, and perhaps from different institutions. In addition to teachers, administration as well as students could be interviewed to gather a wider perspective. Further research could also incorporate female participants to see whether female native English teachers share the same experiences. It could also look at the use of the students' mother tongue in another country. Secondly, methods of triangulation could be used to counter threats to validity. For example, data triangulation, as distinguished by Denzin (1988), would strengthen the validity of the study. As well as using

interviews, observations could be done, and possibly questionnaires for the students, as long as this was ethically approved. There is also the possibility of observer triangulation, with the use of more than one observer in the study.

During the interviews all of the teachers expressed that it is against the school's policy to speak Arabic during English lessons. However, they opined that this policy is not implemented by teachers or enforced by administration. A developed study may lead to a rethinking of this institutional policy. The push to recruit native English speakers may be supported by research, as previously discussed. However, with the importance of classroom management in relation to student achievement, if a further study yielded similar results, recruiters may just have something to ponder.

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