The Attitudes of Teachers on the Use of First Language in English

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Article Info	Abstract
	This study examines the use of the first language (L1), here Kurdish or Arabic, from the perspective of teachers in the process of teaching and learning English in EFL classrooms at the English Department, College of Languages, the University of Duhok in Kurdistan. The study investigates four different areas; the first one is to find out if the English Department/ the College of Languages have a policy for the teachers for using L1. The second one is to investigate if the use of L1 is a necessity. The study also investigates whether the use of L1 facilitates or hinders the teaching and learning of English at the department/college. Finally, it explores if the teachers' use of L1 is based on other bases rather than the policy set by the department or the college if there is any policy. The last part presents the results of the study; the study concludes that there are no specific policies administrated neither by the English Department nor the College of the languages to use L1. In addition, judicious and limited use of L1 by teachers is a better approach to take in EFL classes than to include or exclude it totally, and the use of L1 is mostly based on the students' needs and lesson content. **Keywords:** First language, second language, foreign language, teaching, English language.

The use of L1 has been a continuous argument for ages in history and continues to be (Kim & Wynne, 2021; Gadgil & Bossert, 1970;). Some scholars support the use of L1, and claim that the role of L1 cannot be ignored as it helps learners in their process of learning a foreign language (FL). Others oppose the use of L1 in teaching a FL as they claim that the use of L1 prevents learners from valuable input in the target language (TL).

Currently, the use of L1 is not principled in the classes of teaching second language (L2) at the English Department, College of Languages, University of Duhok. Despite that fact, the use of both the L1 and L2 together is considered important support and tool for the teachers in teaching, and there have been many theoretical arguments for the use of L1 in classes of L2. Nevertheless, there has been little research carried out to investigate whether or not L1 is to be used by the teachers of this department, and there is a lack of evidence in the Kurdistan educational context. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill in this gap.

One way to tackle this issue is through a questionnaire to be given to the teachers of the English Department to determine whether or not the use of L1 supports or hinders the teaching of L2.

Aims and Questions of the Study

The present paper aims at finding out whether teachers at the university level follow a certain policy set by the English Department/ College of languages for the use of L1 in their EFL classes. At the same time, it aims at discovering if the use of L1 facilitates or hinders the process of teaching L2. Another aim of the study is to explore the occasions the teachers at the university level use L1 for.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. Is there a policy by the English Department/ College of Languages to use L1 in teaching EFL classes?

2. Is the use of L1 a necessity in the teaching and learning in EFL classes at the university level?

3. What is the occasion(s) university teachers use L1 in their EFL classes?

4. Does the use of L1 in the classroom hinder or facilitate the teaching and learning of EFL?

Significance of the study

Few studies have been conducted on teachers' attitudes on the use of L1 at the university level in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, such as the one by Khoshnaw (2014), especially at the English Department, College of Languages, University of Duhok.

The current study is an attempt to examine whether the English Department/College of Languages has a particular policy for their teachers to follow when they use L1 in teaching EFL. It is also an attempt to provide the teachers with an overview of the role of L1 in EFL classrooms.

Introduction

The Role of L1 in EFL Classrooms

Some scholars support the judicious use of L1, which plays a positive role in the process of FL teaching and learning. L1 can be helpful for many purposes such as, explaining the meaning of new vocabularies (Morahan, 2010; Jingxia, 2010), to give instructions, especially with low-level learners in order to ensure they comprehend the instructions and know what is required from them (Machaal, 2012; Wells, 1999; Cole 1998), or to explain complex grammar structures and points (Machaal, 2012). This indicates that the use of L1 by the teachers is recommended as a facilitating tool so that learners comprehend the knowledge and be able to use the TL in return. The use of L1 is supported at appropriate times and inappropriate places.

There are also other scholars who do not support the use of L1 in EFL classes, and they raise the following points in this regard such as; learners need to be exposed to TL as much

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as possible; consequently, learners can build their own language system (Wong-Fillmore, 1985; Ellis, 1984). Krashen and Terrel (1983) demand for 'comprehensible input' and 'meaning'; therefore, they believe the maximum exposure to L2 in the class is necessary. Ellis (1984) argued that the use of the L1 by teachers would deprive learners from valuable TL input, and Wong-Fillmore (1985) stated that learners tend to ignore valuable TL input when their teachers constantly use L1. The patterns that are transferred through the use of L1 are a fundamental source of errors in the process of learning L2 (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). These scholars are the evidence of the negative influence of L1, which they insist on the use of only TL in EFL classrooms. The inclusion or exclusion of L1 from EFL classes has been an ongoing debate among researchers and linguists.

The Case for and Against the Use of L1 in EFL Classroom

The use of L1 in the L2 teaching process has been linked with many advantages. Experts in this field of profession claim that the facilitating role of L1 in teaching and learning a second or foreign language cannot be ignored, and not to use it would be wasting a valuable resource (Deller & Rinvolucri, 2002). Without the use of L1 and following the monolingual approach in teaching, it can create barriers and tension. Thus, to start teaching with the use of L1, it would create a sense of security among learners that would be willing to take risks with TL teaching (Pachler & Field, 2001; Auerbach, 1993). Burden (2000) points out that to attempt to increase the amount of L2 rather than giving a simple and accurate translation of a word in L1, it would take several minutes for the teacher to explain in L2. This can make a student frustrated. The use of only English in EFL classrooms can lead to problems because there would be no guarantees if the instructions are understood correctly. Similarly, Palmer (1965) says that the use of L1 is harmless and rather positive in teaching and learning a FL.

In accordance with this, Auerbach (1993) makes some other points about the uses of L1, in which it can be useful in classroom management, language analysis, presenting rules that govern grammar, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts explaining errors, and checking for comprehension. Harbord (1992) mentions that the use of L1 is time-saving and it avoids confusion in the process of teaching and learning a FL. At the same time, Weschler (1997) recommends the use of English where possible and L1 where necessary. Many studies agree on the systematic and deliberate use of L1 in the classroom and the unnecessary use to be avoided.

Despite the many benefits of using L1 in teaching and learning a FL, the overuse of L1 should be avoided. One of the disadvantages of the excessive use of L1, according to Harmer (2001), is that it restricts the student's exposure to the TL. The overuse of L1 in a class where a foreign language is taught would be a hindrance to that process, and it will take away the opportunity of being exposed to the L2. The more learners are exposed to the TL, the quicker they will learn the language and be able to use it. Krashen (1982) in his 'input hypothesis' focuses on this point by stating that the more exposure to L2, the more input in L2 the learners would receive. This idea is further supported by Willis (1996, p. 49) when he

states that 'explain to students that if they want to communicate in the TL, they need to practice'. Students are to be convinced that their communicative needs in the TL are achievable through the means of speaking in that language, and their speaking skills advance by practicing. Macaro (2001) stresses this by adding that a language is learned through practice. The use of TL is to be forced upon learners (Weinberg, 1990).

Other researchers such as Harbord (1992) criticize the teachers who use L1 in order to save time, give instructions, explain grammar, and build rapport with students. He states that the principle of L2 acquisition by exposure is to be focused upon. Seligson (1997, p. 22) sees that 'by using English most or all of the time in class, you give students vital listening practice, and the opportunity to respond naturally to spoken English.' This creates the environment for the learner to listen to the real language and provide them with communication opportunities. It is necessary for the teacher to use L2 and practice it throughout the class time, or the learners, in turn, would not appreciate L2 if they could rely on L1 whenever they lack the command of the TL. Many teachers believe that the classroom is the only source of practice and exposure to the TL; hence that language is to be used throughout the time of the class.

Teacher's Perspective on the Use of L1

The teachers' perspective on whether or not to use L1 in EFL classes has been investigated by many scholars, and teachers' perspectives are different in this regard. In classes where both the teachers and learners share the same L1, the use of L1 seems to be unpreventable. Tian and Mascaro (2012) indicated that most of the teachers prefer the use of L1 in their classes. Paker and Karaağaç (2012) proposed that teachers hesitate whether or not to use L1 in their classes, and if they have to use it, for what purpose, when, or why.

Duff and Polio (1990), in their study, revealed that teachers who preferred the exclusive use of L2 in the process of teaching and learning a TL would sometimes switch to L1, especially when they felt helpless. Crawford (2004) undertook a study on the use of L1 in L2 classes with low-level and upper-level learners. It was discovered that the use of L1 was preferred with the former group of learners. However, in the latter group, it was preferred to use L2, which was of more benefit than L1.

Investigating the use of English in the context of Chinese teachers, Song and Andrews (2009) findings showed that of the four teachers who participated in the study, two of them were with the use of L1, and the other two believed that L1 plays a negative role. In a study, McMillan and Rivers (2011) surveyed the use of L1 with twenty-nine teachers at a Japanese university. It was concluded that teachers were with the judicious use of L1 that facilitated L2 learning and teaching. Forman (2007) indicated that the majority of the teachers support the implementation of L1 in teaching, yet they are also concerned with the overuse of L1.

## Method

Instrument and Procedures

A total of 33 teachers from the English Department, College of Languages, University of Duhok voluntarily participated in the quantitative data collection by completing a questionnaire. In the study, a descriptive research method was used for data collection (Sukamolson, 2007). The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire that consisted of 9 different statements about the participants' teaching experiences and the use of L1. The participants were also asked if they use L1 in their classes, and if the Department/College has a certain policy for the teachers to follow or if there are some other bases, they depend on to use L1, and whether the use of L1 facilitates or hinders the teaching of L2.

The native language of 82% of the teachers who participated in this study was Kurdish, and the native language of the rest was Arabic, representing 18%. This is shown in Figure 1.
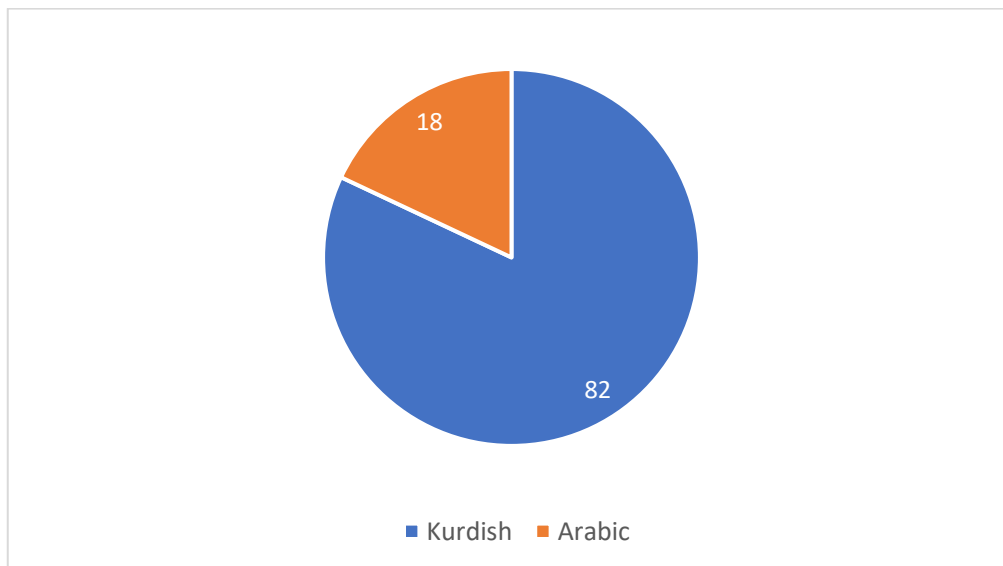
Figure 1: Teachers' Native Language

The participants' teaching experiences ranged as follows: teachers who have 8 to 12 years of experience represented the majority, and 1 to 4 years of experience represented the lowest percentage, as shown below (Figure 2).
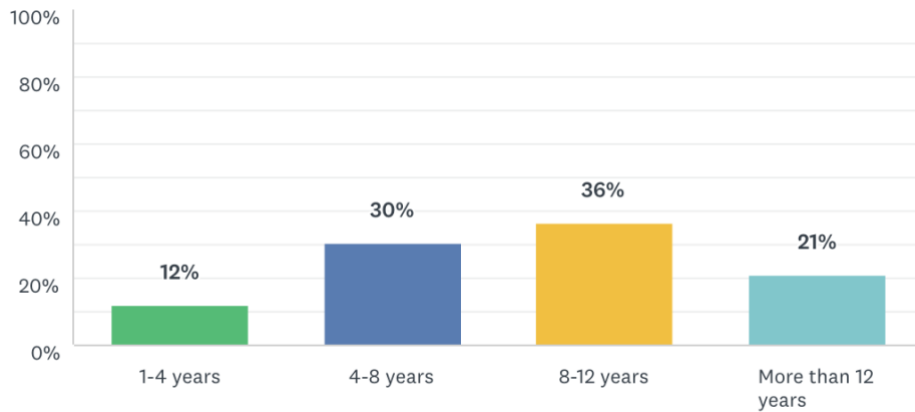
Figure 2: Teachers' Experience in Teaching

The questionnaire was formed using SurveyMonkey and then emailed to all of the teachers. The data analysis process was conducted with the help of SurveyMonkey.

The researcher informed all of the participants that the questionnaire is not to judge their teaching towards the use of L1/L2. This was done to avoid bias, in which case and the teachers might change their behavior and answer in order to fulfill the perceived requirement of the research.

Results and Discussion

The results indicated that most of the teachers that took part in this study stated that the use of L1 is necessary for teaching. In fact, 70% of them supported this idea. At the same time, only 30% did not support it. (Figure 3).
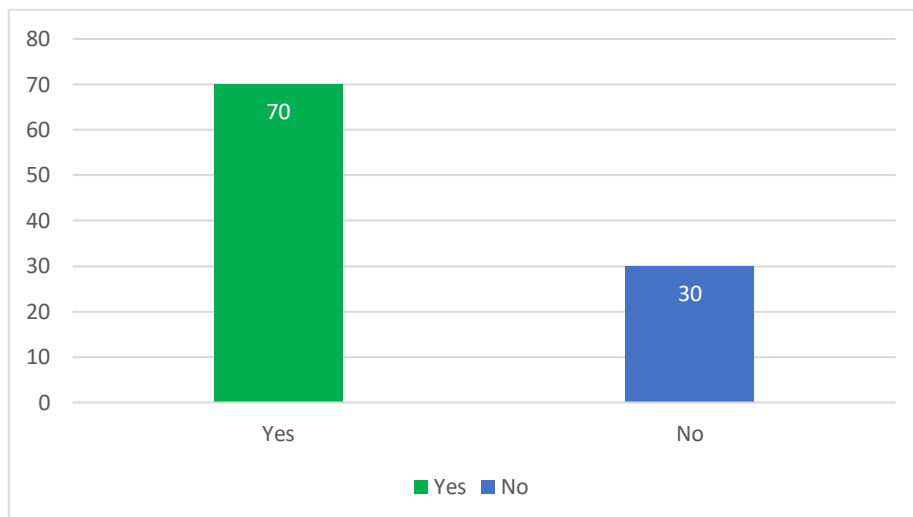

Figure 3: The Use of L1 as a Necessity

Figure 4 shows that on the one hand, 76% of teachers use L1 in teaching L2, and they mostly use it for new vocabularies and in giving instructions. On the other hand, 24% of them never use L1 in their classroom.
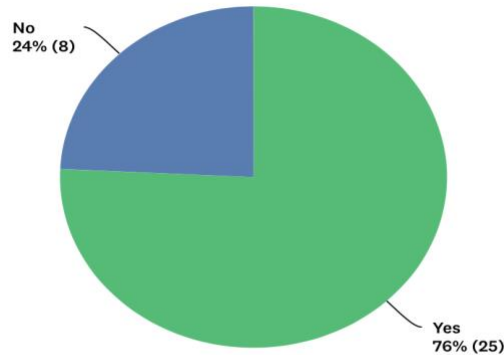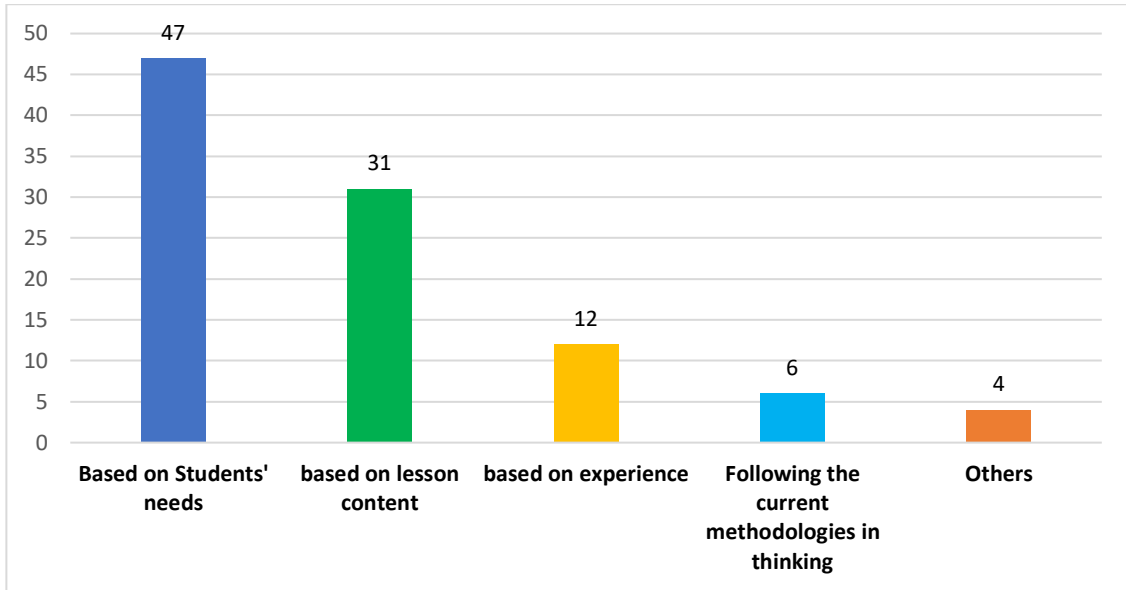

Figure 4: Teachers Use of L1 in Teaching L2

The responses to the question of if there is a certain policy by the college/department for the use of L1 revealed some interesting data. As shown in *Figure 5*, the majority of the teachers, which represents 97% of them, said there is not a certain policy to follow when they use L1, and 3% (which represents only one teacher) of them said that the college has a policy for the use of L1 and claimed that the department advises teachers to use L2 as much as possible.
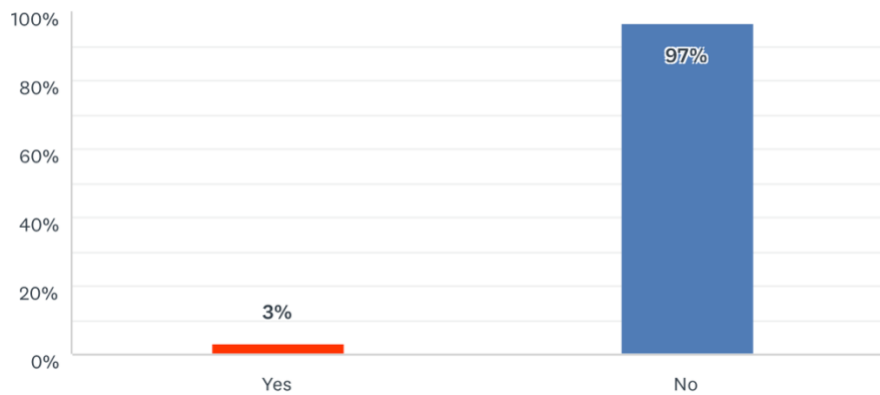

Figure 5: The Policy of Using L1

In the light of the results shown in *Figure 6*, it could be figured out that teachers mostly fall back to the use of L1 based on students' needs with 47%; 31% based on lesson content, 12% based on experience, 6% based on the current methodologies in thinking and 4% others.

Figure 6: The Bases of Using L1

When the teachers were asked if they think that the use of L1 facilitates or hinders the process of teaching L2, 70% of them stated that it facilitates, and 30% stated it hinders that process, as shown below in *Figure 7*.
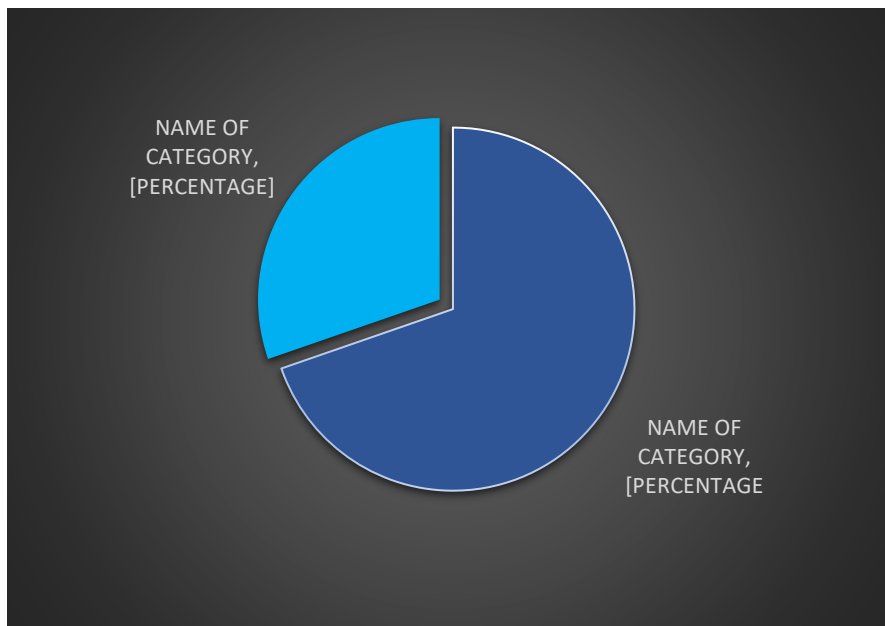
Figure 7: L1 Facilitates or Hinders Teaching L2

In this study, findings showed that the English Department/ College of Languages does not have a policy of its own for the teachers to follow when they tend to go back to the use of L1 in classes of L2 teaching. Besides, most of the teachers think that the use of L1 is necessary; therefore, they use L1 in their classes. This is in accordance with other studies that indicate to not using L1 would be wasting valuable input (Deller & Rinvolucri, 2002). The teachers' use of L1 is based mostly on the students' needs, based on lesson content,

based on experience, and some other factors. Nevertheless, they stated that the use of L1 to be judicious and limited. On most occasions, teachers use L1 for instructions and new vocabulary. They use L1 for instructions so that learners understand what they are supposed to do and to avoid confusion. They also use L1 for explaining new vocabularies since it saves time and learners comprehend it easily. Similarly, Burden (2000) stated that using L1 and providing a simple and accurate translation of a word in L1 instead of attempting to increase the amount of L2 would safe students from tension and barriers. For most of the teachers at the department, the use of L1 is considered as a facilitator in the process of teaching English (Palmer 1965).

Conclusion

It is of great significance that the effects of age of L1 acquisition on both L1 and L2 outcome are evident across levels of linguistic structure, that is, syntax, phonology, and the lexicon. The results demonstrated that L1 acquisition bestows both facility with the linguistic structure of the L1 and the ability to lean linguistic in the L2. The majority of teachers in this study demonstrated that they have a common understanding and agreement when it comes to the role of L1 in L2 classes. Teachers considered that the use of L1 is necessary to teach L2; thus, they use L1 as a tool to support their teaching. The lack of a certain policy, as claimed by most of the teachers, by the College of Languages or English Department for the use of L1 has made teachers to base their use of L1 to be mostly on the students' needs, on the lesson content, on their experience, and following the current methodologies in teaching which supports the judicious use of L1. They also believe that L1 acts as a facilitating tool and does not hinder the teaching and learning of L2. It was discovered that numerous studies were conducted to find out the interference of L1 in L2 from the perspective of teachers in the process of teaching and learning English in EFL classrooms, but only few of them were done to reveal the interference of L2 in L1. Thus, it is recommended that more studies should be conducted to investigate to what extent the L2 affects L1 or how L2 acquisition can have an effect on the first language.

Conflict of interests

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1
Questionnaire

(Please try to answer all the questions applicable to your situation)

I am doing research under the title of '**The Attitudes of Teachers on the Use of First Language in English**. The questionnaire aims to find out whether teachers at university level are using L1 in their EFL classes. It is not a test and there are no correct or wrong answers. Your personal and sincere answers will be appreciated. I assure your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality in accordance with research ethics. Thank you for your kind cooperation and participation.

Researcher
Hamza Y. Zeebaree

1. **Which year/ stage do you teach?**
   a) First Year
   b) Second Year
   c) Third Year
   d) Fourth Year
2. **Your native language**
3. **What is your age?**
   a) **25**-**35**
   b) **35**-**45**
   c) More than **45**
4. **For how many years have you been teaching English?**
    1-4 years
   a) 4-8 years
   b) 8-12 years
   c) More than 12 years
5. **Do you think it is necessary to use L1 in the English classroom taught at the university level?**
    Yes, why?
   a) No, why?
6. **Do you, yourself as a teacher, use L1 in your class?**
   o Yes.
     If yes, for what occasion(s)? _____
   o No, why?   Skip Question number 8
7. **Is there a certain policy by the college/department for the use of L1 in teaching?**
   o Yes.
     If yes, what is it? _____
   o No.
8. **On what basis or bases do you decide to use L1 in the English classroom?**
   (Select all that apply)
   a. Based on the lesson content
   b. Based on students' needs
   c. Based on experience
   d. Following the current methodologies in teaching
   e. Other (please, specify) _____
9. **Do you think using L1 facilitates or hinders the teaching of the English language in your classroom?**
   o Facilitates
     If facilitates, why and how? _____
   o Hinders. Why?

Thank you!