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Plurilingualism and monolingualism in foreign language classrooms: The perspective of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The idea of teaching a target language via a monolingual medium of instruction in the classroom has long predominated in the pedagogical context. In Saudi Arabia, excluding the students' mother tongue (Arabic) in the foreign language classroom has been seen as a tool that accelerates the acquisition of the target language (English). This is widely viewed as the most practical and effective method of language learning, especially in the Gulf region, where English is a foreign language employed in the fields of economics and business. The recent academic argument that exploiting the students' linguistic repertoire, including the mother tongue, in the target language classroom boosts and fosters the students' learning cycle is still encountering huge resistance, especially among second/foreign language teachers. To explore this dispute from the perspective of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in intermediate and secondary schools, a case study was conducted with 34 teachers in the Qassim region, Saudi Arabia, through questionnaires and a focus group interview. The study found that most teachers believe that the policy of using the target language (English) only is the most effective method of language learning. They employed the students' mother tongue (Arabic) on an ad hoc basis to ensure complete comprehension, organize classroom tasks or convey personal remarks. In addition, the study revealed that teachers' understanding of plurilingualism was unclear and limited to the verbal use of two languages, and that EFL teachers need more clarification on its application in the classroom.

Keywords: Plurilingualism, monolingualism, classroom education, foreign language learning, mother tongue

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is commonly considered a challenging practice by teachers. Some challenges arise from the capability of the students to interact and communicate with their teachers in the target language. Others derive from stakeholders who continue to insist on an English-only policy as they still believe it is the best approach to acquire a foreign language. This issue has increasingly become a great obstacle to students in the classroom. Whenever the idea of plurilingualism is brought up for discussion a long dispute can be

expected. This dispute is understandable, but a space for constructive discussion is needed, especially nowadays, when new theories are evolving with regard to allowing students' first language to be used together with the target language in EFL classrooms. Plurilingualism is not the exception; indeed, it is quite popular around the world, especially where multicultural and national backgrounds coexist (Blommaert, 2010; Lamb, 2015). The phenomenon of plurilingualism, according to Marshall and Moore (2018, p. 19), concerns: "…the study of individuals' repertoires and agency in several languages, in different contexts, in which the individual is the locus and actor of contact; accordingly, a person's languages and cultures interrelate and change over time, depending on individual biographies, social trajectories, and life paths."

In other words, it is seen as an individual characteristic, in contrast to multilingualism, which is considered a societal phenomenon (García & Otheguy, 2020). This individualist feature affords individuals within societies their preference of linguistic choices for the purpose of communication and improving their communicative competence. Hence, plurilingual speakers are aware of their plurilingual practice and also pay attention to others' plurilingual practice. This awareness raises the attention of speakers and supports their goal of achieving linguistic competence. In addition, plurilingualism concentrates on the language itself and attempts to help monolinguals become bi/multilinguals with a view to building a "repertoire of languages" (García & Otheguy, 2020, p. 21). This case study, therefore, aims to explore the idea of plurilingualism in terms of the views held by EFL teachers in intermediate and secondary schools in the Qassim region, Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire was distributed among EFL teachers concerning their awareness of the term "plurilingualism" and their perspectives regarding the inclusion of the two languages, mother tongue and target language, in the classroom. A focus group interview was then conducted to attain a deep understanding of their thoughts and concerns about plurilingualism and its application in the classroom.

1. Literature review

A monolingual approach has dominated EFL classrooms for a long period of time. Researchers have traditionally viewed the monolingual approach as enhancing and supporting the students' learning cycle through extensive and strict exposure to and interaction with the target language. They have claimed that it is a practice imitating how children acquire their first language via exposure (Cook, 2001). In addition, they have considered the classroom to be the favorable venue in terms of providing a controlled instructional environment. Moreover, according to García and Otheguy (2020, p. 18), "When elite monolinguals develop as bilinguals, they most often do so in school, where they are taught what is labeled as a second language, to be used completely separately from what is called their

first language or mother tongue". Thus, there is an insistence on sticking to the target language-only policy. This belief raised the need to highlight the impact of monolingualism on the community in general and the context of education in particular (Vallejo & Dooly, 2020). The issue with the monolingual approach was chiefly that: "…second- and foreign-language pedagogy became focused on correcting errors and eradicating interference. Students acquiring what is regarded as a foreign or a second language were expected to be two monolinguals in one" (García & Otheguy, 2020, p. 18).

Therefore, developing and maintaining an inclusive linguistic repertoire does not tend to be supported in such contexts. In contrast, a more flexible view that would allow the students' whole linguistic repertoire to be used in EFL classrooms is gradually gaining prominence. This approach, termed plurilingualism, "tries to capture the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner" (Piccardo, 2019, p. 184). The prospective shift from monolingualism to plurilingualism has brought the two approaches into the light and begged the question of whether or not plurilingualism is worth considering. Allowing students' mother tongue to be used in the classroom will potentially enhance the students' comprehension ability and foster their metalinguistic awareness. Indeed, Cook (2001, p. 405) argues that "dismissing the L1 out of hand restricts the possibilities for language teaching" and it has been argued that exploiting students' full linguistic repertoire can accelerate the learning process generally, including learning new languages (Haenni Hoti & Heinzmann, 2012; Moore, 2016; Ò Laoire & Singleton, 2009). The world's population is now in constant contact and therefore several languages interact, either face to face or online. This interaction has led to the emergence of "…a wide spectrum of nomenclatures: plurilingual modes, heteroglossia, languaging, translingual practices, translanguaging, transglossia, crossing, code-meshing, polylanguaging, metrolingualism and transidiomatic practices" (Vallejo & Dooly, 2020, p. 2).

Indeed, bi/multilinguals do not keep each language in a separate compartment, but build up a unitary communicative competence. However, it is worth noting that employing plurilingualism in EFL classrooms is not a straightforward practice as there are some challenges regarding how it can be implemented (Boeckmann, 2012). These challenges differ among societies and between educational contexts, depending on their specific characteristics, but they all share the same main issues discussed in this article.

1.1 Previous research

The long-standing argument supporting the monolingual approach claims that prohibiting students' mother tongue in EFL classrooms will support students' language development (Ekman, 2015; Iannacci, 2008). This claim, according to Cook (2008) can only hold for the sake of avoiding students' becoming confused in

their learning cycle. Moreover, other researchers have found that abandoning students' mother tongue can hamper their ability to retain their previous knowledge (Cimbganda & Mokgwathi, 2012; Cook, 2001). Thus, students will not be able to benefit from their full inherited learning skills. English learning in EFL classrooms should incorporate students' local context, language and culture, which are part of their identity (Jiménez, López-Gopar, & Morales, 2014). In this regard, the mother tongue can serve as a useful linguistic resource in learning the target language. Thus, the view that "English is perceived as having a distinct linguistic reality and, as such, can be taught without any reference to the existing language repertoire of the child/student" must be reassessed and reconsidered (García & Otheguy, 2020, p. 19).

A very recent study conducted by Dooly and Vallejo (2020) concerned how to integrate plurilingual practices in language education. The study took place in Spain and used data collected through a workshop with 15 primary and secondary teachers. In the workshop, the teachers were given some activities and topics to discuss and debate concerning plurilingualism and pedagogy. The study found that "languages are not treated as separate resources and yet these teachers have been hired to ensure the learning of one specific language" (p. 93). Although the teachers were open to the application of plurilingualism in the classroom, they found it challenging to relinquish the idea of the primacy of students' exposure to the target language. In addition, they were concerned about employing an approach that might go against the will of policymakers and students' parents, who still believe in the separation of languages.

1.2 The role of policy

English is not only a communicative tool, but also a cultural and social marker. Stakeholders are very keen to enhance and support students' learning; however, they are reluctant to accept major changes, such as allowing EFL classrooms to be flexible regarding the inclusion of the students' mother tongue. This is probably due to their concern that providing EFL classrooms with more linguistic diversity might hinder students' linguistic development and detract from their focus on the target language. In other words, they are more concerned with the expected challenges than thinking of the potential benefits of creating a diverse linguistic environment that EFL classrooms currently lack. Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) urge policymakers in Saudi Arabia to deepen their understanding of the linguistic situation in the country, respond to what scientific research has revealed and design a strategic plan that includes the interests of Saudi nationals. Indeed, the "internationalization of education" and the "globalization of English" are crucial nowadays and plurilingualism as a practice should be implemented. By having a strict language allocation policy, school policy that the students' mother tongue is prohibited in EFL classrooms is officially reinforced (García & Otheguy, 2020).

Following the establishment of official education in Saudi Arabia in 1925, English was first incorporated in the educational system in 1937. This early introduction indicates the eagerness of the government to include English in its national sphere. However, the inclusion of the use of English in the Saudi community was minimal. The Saudi community was considered very conservative compared to neighboring countries in the surrounding region. This was partially due to a misunderstanding, namely that English posed a cultural and social threat to Arabic, which Muslims—including Saudis—consider a divine language. After the events of 9/11 and later the birth of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known as ISIS, and the allegations of links to Arab and Islamic countries, pressure on Saudi Arabia to liberalize its education system was at its peak (Habbash, 2011). As a result, a major transformation of the whole education system began, including the use of English. Over time, English has become the "gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society" (Pennycook, 1995, p. 39). Indeed, English is now considered a social and professional asset, especially among Saudi youth.

Empirical and theoretical analysis of English language use in EFL contexts provides policymakers with a holistic view of its application, the implications of its use, and how they can be addressed. For instance, Zaid (1993) conducted a study regarding the actual practice of English language in Saudi public schools. He employed questionnaires and classroom observations, focusing on the practice of teachers and the opinions of school supervisors in Saudi Arabia. He found that the teaching method applied was mainly grammar translation and students' participation was minimal. Therefore, students' communication skills were not being developed. Another study conducted by Zafer (2002) regarding teachers' preferred teaching strategies in the classroom in Saudi public schools again found that grammar translation was the strategy most employed. However, it is widely assumed that the current situation in English language classrooms is quite different. Saudi families send their children to private English institutions and some send them abroad during the summer holidays to improve their English skills. This is a dramatic shift, as it indicates the openness of the community and acceptance of English as a global language.

1.3 Theoretical lens

Knowledge is socially constructed and attained via interaction and communication. The plurilingual perspective holds that an individual's whole linguistic repertoire should be allowed everywhere and without restriction for the sake of achieving communicative competence. This emerged from "…Anglophone contexts with highly multilingual and multicultural populations where bilingual education and the empowerment of linguistic minorities have been long pursued objectives (e.g. the UK, Canada, bigger cities in the USA). In terms of language use, it has been explained as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire

without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 283).

Plurilingualism appears to incorporate socio-political and epistemological aspects that may signal language users' own orientations, contextualizations, and co-construction of roles in interaction (see Lüdi, 2020). It is seen as emergent, situated, and undergoing constant evolution and change (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 1997), and is employed in a creative way in which speakers can expand their linguistic repertoire and improve their communicative competence (Vallejo & Dooly, 2020). Another facet is that plurilingualism focuses from an emic perspective on what plurilingual speakers do with their communicative resources. In the context of this study, the target language is considered a foreign language. As pointed out by García and Otheguy (2020, p. 19): "…the linguistic conception centered on named languages that represent different cultures and political states has had its most influence in foreign language education. In these classrooms, students considered monolingual representatives of the nation-state, are taught an additional language, which is always seen as second to their first. Foreign language education programs reinforce the construction of named languages as spoken in specified, and foreign, nation-state(s), the idea being that the learning of this language will contribute to increased communication between people of different countries".

Thus, the traditional idea of the separation of languages is strongly reinforced by foreign language education programs and policymakers, ultimately constituting a considerable obstacle to the notion of plurilingualism.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods approach to examine the various perspectives of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabian public schools concerning plurilingualism in the classroom. The sample comprised 34 teachers (17 females and 17 males) at intermediate and secondary schools in the Qassim region, teaching students aged 12–17 years. Data were collected through a questionnaire and a focus group interview. All the participating teachers had at least 5 years of teaching experience. They were all Saudi and proficient in English as well as their mother tongue (Arabic). All participants were asked to sign consent forms that contained details about the nature of the study and guaranteed their anonymity.

2.1 Research questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Do teachers of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) believe that they should teach only using the target language (English)?
   (a) If so, why? / (b) If not, why not?

2. What do teachers of English in the KSA think about the use of Arabic in English language classes?
   (a) Is the use of Arabic valid for teaching purposes (by teachers)?
   (b) Is the use of Arabic valid for learning purposes (by students)?
   (c) Is the use of Arabic relevant only for non-academic purposes (e.g., greeting, leave taking)?

The design of the study, articulated through the research questions, aimed to ensure rigor and thoroughness. The first research question intended to address teachers' perspectives concerning a monolingual versus a plurilingual approach. Elaboration on their perspectives was needed and elicited through the focus group interview. The second research question aimed to tackle the reasons for and functions of allowing use of the students' mother tongue in the EFL classroom. By addressing and discussing responses to these research questions, the study aimed to enhance understanding of the phenomena of monolingualism and plurilingualism in language classrooms.

2.2 Instruments

Various research instruments are available to researchers, designed to provide answers to different types of questions and elicit information from research participants. In this study, to achieve validity and reliability, Selamat's (2014) questionnaire was adapted, with participants asked to indicate their responses to statements based on a standard Likert scale. There were 19 statements in total and the questionnaire was divided into two parts: The first part concerned the functions of allowing plurilingualism in the classroom (see Table 1), and the second part focused on teachers' attitudes towards plurilingualism (see Table 2). Following the questionnaire, a focus group interview was conducted with some of the participating teachers (n = 5, all male). These teachers were chosen randomly and based on their willingness and availability to participate. The focus group interview, which lasted 52 minutes, began with an introduction to the study and its purpose. I then followed up on the questionnaire responses in greater detail.

3. Results

Based on the results of the analysis, presented below, it can be argued that the majority of teachers were reluctant when it came to implementing plurilingualism in EFL classrooms; however, they acknowledged the merits of allowing the use of students' full linguistic repertoire. This could indicate low awareness among teachers of their practices in the classroom. It perhaps also indicates their limited power over their practices, which mostly followed the instructions handed down by policymakers. During the focus group interview, the interviewees were more transparent regarding their choices in the classroom. They believed that targeting

proficiency over communicative competence was more desirable for parents and stakeholders. In the following sections, a thorough analysis is provided, employing the questionnaire and focus group interview data respectively.

Tab. 1: Functions of using students' mother tongue in the classroom (scale 1–5, %)

No.	In class, I switch from English to Arabic…	Never	Hardly ever	Often	Most of the time	Every time
1	To explain the meaning of words and difficult concepts.	0	8.8	26.5	52.9	11.8
2	To explain grammar explicitly.	0	0	44.1	38.2	17.6
3	To check for comprehension.	2.4	3.2	61.8	23.5	9.1
4	To organize classroom tasks.	4.4	7.2	55.8	25.5	7.1
5	To introduce unfamiliar materials/topics.	11.8	17.6	38.2	20.6	11.8
6	To draw students' attention to the correct pronunciation of sounds in English.	17.6	8.8	35.3	20.6	17.6
7	To provide praise/feedback/personal remarks about students' performance.	7.4	9.2	50.8	24.5	8.1
8	To build/strengthen interpersonal relations between the teacher and students.	5.9	20.6	26.5	26.5	20.6
9	To reduce students' anxiety in learning English.	14.7	14.7	38.2	14.7	17.6
10	To increase students' motivation and confidence.	17.6	14.7	20.6	35.3	11.8

3.1 Questionnaire

Table 1 shows teachers' responses regarding the functions of allowing plurilingualism to be used in the classroom. Functions related to achieving comprehension and understanding are more salient than those related to lack of vocabulary and low proficiency. Although the majority of teachers endorsed employing the students' mother tongue to explain meaning and difficult concepts (see No. 1), their primary concern in making recourse to their mother tongue was to ensure students' comprehension, organize classroom tasks, and convey personal remarks (see Nos. 3, 4, 7). Due to the word limits of this paper, the focus here is on the three functions most stressed by respondents, especially during the focus group interview (Nos. 3, 4, 7).

Figure 1 shows that 94.4% of participating teachers accepted students' use of their first language, but not for the usual purpose, i.e., explaining grammar or introducing new words; rather, it was mostly employed to ensure students' comprehension and understanding of the content delivered. This is an interesting outcome, indicating teachers' endeavor to achieve students' full understanding of task-related content. Although the students' mother tongue may be used for many reasons, achieving comprehension was not thought to be a priority in a context in which fluency is targeted more than anything else.

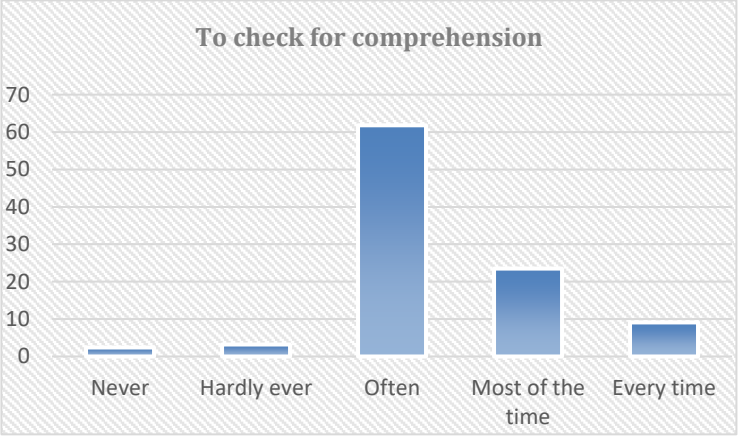


Fig. 1: Teachers acceptánce of students' use of their first language

In addition, Figure 2 illustrates that besides striving for comprehension, 88.4% of participating teachers employed the students' mother tongue to organize classrooms tasks, which is also an indication of their attempt to achieve comprehension, but regarding instructions. It seems that these two functions both reflect teachers' eagerness to achieve comprehension through organizing classroom tasks in understandable language. This is a point of interest in the context of this study as in Saudi Arabia, English is still considered a job requirement, rather than an important communicative tool. Insisting that students must understand what they are asked to do in the classroom rather than leaving them to guess the meaning by themselves and thus wasting valuable time is a merit.

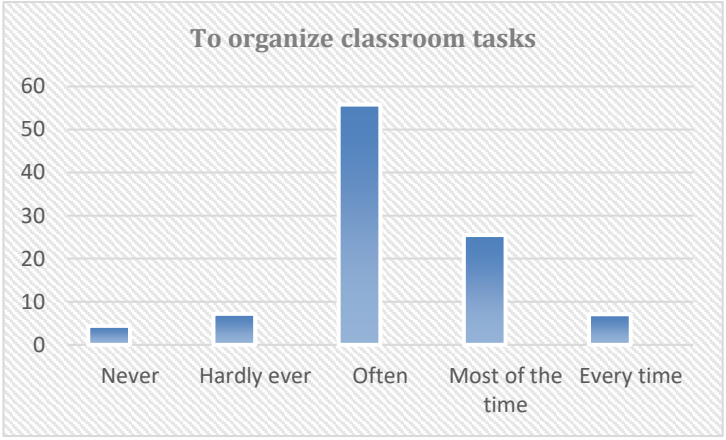


Fig. 2: Teachers úse of students' mother tongue to organize classrooms tasks

Figure 3 shows the extent to which teachers employ the students' mother tongue for the purpose of delivering personal remarks. In all, 83.4% of participating teachers employed the students' mother tongue to convey personal comments, feedback, and observations. It is a highly effective way of making an impact on the students and building strong relations. This is related to teachers' intention to enhance the cultural impact of language use. It seems that this function is again related to the two mentioned above as they all reinforce the idea of putting students at the center of teaching and learning.

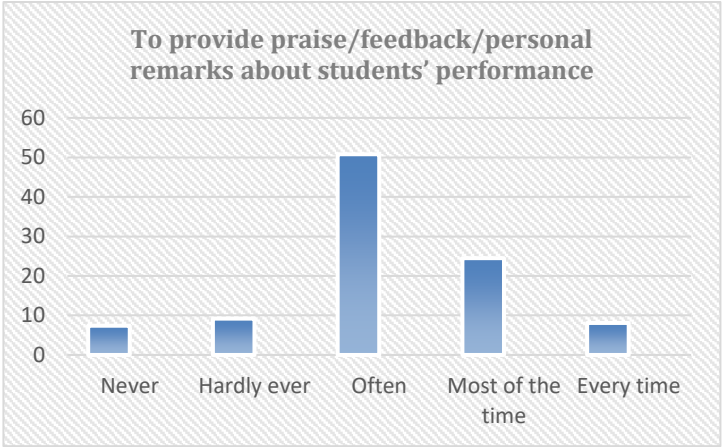


Fig. 3: Teachers´use of students' mother tongue to deliver personal remarks

Furthermore, Table 2 shows teachers' opinions regarding the use of the students' mother tongue alongside the target language. It can be seen that teachers are broadly in line with practicing plurilingualism in the classroom (Nos. 11–16); however, they simultaneously still support the monolingual approach (Nos. 14–19). This discrepancy may indicate that teachers are not confident about the usefulness of plurilingualism and are afraid they would be violating school policy in applying it. This is a real hindrance in terms of fostering an environment facilitating the development of communicative competence. In certain respects, the teachers were not consistent in their opinions regarding delivering a plurilingual classroom experience (No. 17). This could be linked to their lack of understanding of the purpose of a plurilingual approach and its advantages over a monolingual one. They were not fully aware of the benefits for students of being supported by their whole linguistic repertoire; rather, they considered the potential drawbacks in terms of hindering students' language proficiency.

3.2 Focus group interview

In the focus group interview, the participants were more transparent regarding their main concerns in EFL classrooms. They stressed the need to ensure comprehension and full understanding. Indeed, their highest priority was to make students understand what was said in the classroom. For instance, interviewee (3) stated that "teachers cannot limit the students' linguistic capacity by neglecting their mother tongue." Moreover, interviewee (4) argued that "in contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where English use is limited, 45 minutes a day is not enough to raise students' proficiency." Therefore, they thought that they should strive for comprehension rather than proficiency. This is in line with García and Otheguy's (2020, p. 20) argument that "language as taught and used in schools tends to have little to do with the language practices of people outside school." In addition, they were not aware that this view would actually support the notion of plurilingualism, according to which achieving comprehension is a high priority. Indeed, it can be argued that there is no point concentrating on the target language and neglecting the students' comprehension of the course-related content. Furthermore, although the interviewees stressed the importance of achieving comprehension, they were reluctant to make it the only priority, especially in EFL classrooms. Although they reported that the mother tongue was used in some ways in the classroom, they did not see plurilingualism increasing. For example, interviewee (1) raised his concern that by "allowing the students' mother tongue to be used in EFL classrooms, parents would not be happy about it. They should be informed of the benefit of allowing their children's mother tongue in the classroom."

Tab. 2: Teachers' perceptions of plurilingualism (scale 1–5, %)

No.	I believe that…	Totally agree	Agree a little	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree a little	Totally disagree
11	Plurilingualism will facilitate the language learning process.	38.2	32.4	23.5	5.9	0
12	The practice of plurilingualism will increase the students' reliance and dependence on the teacher.	26.5	44.1	20.6	5.9	2.9
13	Plurilingualism should be included as an integral part of the EFL lesson.	23.5	41.2	29.4	5.9	0
14	There should be a strict separation of the mother tongue and English in the EFL classroom.	20.6	29.4	23.5	17.6	8.8
15	Plurilingualism should only be used as a last resort when all other options have been exhausted.	32.4	41.2	11.8	8.8	5.9
16	Plurilingualism is an efficient, time-saving technique.	35.3	38.2	23.5	2.9	0
17	English is best taught in English-only classrooms.	26.5	11.8	23.5	20.6	17.6
18	The use of other languages in the EFL classroom will result in a decline in the standard of English.	20.6	35.5	26.5	8.8	8.8
19	The more English used, the better the results for the learners.	50	35.3	8.8	2.9	2.9

4. Discussion

From the results presented above, it can be argued that teachers are broadly convinced of usefulness of plurilingualism, but they are not sure of its implications in EFL contexts. They are worried that adopting this approach may lead to low proficiency in English. This view is endorsed by policymakers and parents, who still insist on the effectiveness of the monolingual approach. They believe that maintaining monolingual classrooms will lead to greater proficiency in English. Thus, it is vital for societies and communities, especially in countries with limited multicultural and multinational facets, such as Saudi Arabia, to raise public awareness and tolerance of linguistic pluralism. In doing so, first language speakers will become more flexible and engaged regarding linguistic diversity and

variation in their classrooms and societies. Indeed, plurilingualism, in contrast to the traditional view, endorses "the importance of what is seen as the L1 to develop proficiency in what are regarded as [the] L2 or L3" (García & Otheguy, 2020, p. 23). It is necessary to accept that individuals are not and cannot be two/three monolinguals in one; rather, languages are complementary and integrated in bilinguals/multilinguals. The students' first language and their fluency in their mother tongue should be used to support the learning of additional languages.

5. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to explore the phenomenon of plurilingualism in terms of perceptions and practice among teachers in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. It was evident that plurilingualism is employed; however, teachers are not aware of this practice as plurilingualism. Teachers assumed that they were responding to the students' needs, but never thought of what they were doing as a scientific argument in academia. This advocates the need for researchers to keep EFL teachers up to date on issues and debates in language learning and teaching. Thus, teachers will be more confident that what they are doing has rational and scientifically established underpinnings, rather than thinking they are violating established language learning and teaching strategies. In addition, it is recommended that further research be conducted on the perspectives of students with regard to plurilingualism and its role in the classroom. In addition, this phenomenon could benefit from an emic analysis on the inclusion of bilinguals' communicative resources. I hope that this study will shed some light upon this phenomenon and encourage teachers to consider applying plurilingualism in their classrooms, bearing in mind the expected benefits for them and their learners.

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