| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Investigating the Use of the First Language in Moroccan EFL Classes

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| **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate whether there is any significant effect of using Moroccan Arabic (*Darija*) in the English as a Foreign Language classroom on Moroccan students' language learning. It highlights where *Darija* is preferred to be used either by students or teachers. Moreover, it seeks to scrutinize whether the mother tongue positively or negatively affects the learners. Multiple case studies research was conducted in five high schools belonging to Beni Mellal-Khenifra region. 132 students and 7 teachers were the population targeted for data collection. The study adopts a mixed method design where quantitative data is generated through a questionnaire and qualitative data is generated through interviews. The gathered data were analyzed using SPSS and content analysis. The findings show that the vast majority of the targeted populations have positive attitudes towards using Moroccan Arabic (*Darija*) in English classes. The study gives insights into how to adequately implement Moroccan Arabic in EFL classes. Additionally; the study also sheds light on some obstacles and limitations and provides some future research perspectives.

1. Introduction

Using the first language in a foreign language teaching context has been debated among scholars for years. Although many studies support the use of L1 in the process of learning, mother tongue is still not recognized, mainly in foreign language education. (Shin et All.,2019). The study at hand investigates the use of Moroccan *Darija* in EFL classrooms and helps to shed light on the effectiveness of using such strategy. By examining the students` attitudes towards the matter, the study can give insights on the use of (*Darija*) as a beneficial tool for improving students` English language skills. Additionally, the study will contribute to the ongoing debate on the best practices for teaching foreign languages. Using students' first language (L1) in EFL classrooms has long been the subject of much disagreement and debate. Cook (2001), for example, claimed the negative influence of such use on FL development. Among these is the belief that a new language is best-taught monolingual without the interference of the mother tongue. Additionally, most scholars in the field believed that foreign language teaching classes should be only restricted to the target language and that students' mother tongue should never be used. This exclusive use of the TL in the classroom is often referred to as the 'monolingual principle' (Howatt, 1984). This principle gained prevalence within the context of the Direct Method and has continued to be influential from then on (Cummins, 2009).

The ideas brought by the reform movement and the Direct Method favored a more authentic and natural way of teaching the language. Student's first language was assumed to have no place in ESL and EFL teaching as the use of translation strategy in the classroom availed in the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was seen as an unnatural act. The justification given for this trend stems from several reasons based mainly on the input learners are exposed to. Krashen's 'Input Hypothesis' (1985) claims that exposure to comprehensible input in contexts of real communication is a key to language proficiency : "humans acquire language in only one way-by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input" (p3).

Nonetheless, the monolingual approach has been increasingly challenged (Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Tsagari and Giannikas, 2018). Auerbach, for example, claimed that "the rational used to justify English only in classroom is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound" (1993, p.9). This growing body of research, beginning in 1990s, called for a reassessment of the contributing role of learners' native language as a potential learning –teaching resource for foreign and second language development. Therefore, more researchers and practitioners sought to investigate the role of L1 in the EFL and ESL classroom. The findings have led to growing opposition to the English-only movement and instead advocating for 'bilingual education', in which both English and mother tongue are used in the classroom.

Supporters of bilingual education reject the long-standing view that L1 is more of an obstacle than a help to FL learners; they rather suggest that the judicious use of the mother tongue can be a valuable pedagogical resource in language teaching. Shin (2019) reported several studies conducted on L1 use, confirming its multi-functionality. This means that, L1 can be used for building interpersonal relationships, classroom management or discipline, and instructional purposes. With that being said, the aim of this study is to further explore the usefulness of using L1 in the EFL classroom.

This study addresses the following questions:

 Q1-What are the EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of Moroccan Arabic in their English classes?
 Q2-To what extent do students appreciate the use of their mother tongue during the EFL classes?
 Q3-How often should Moroccan Arabic be used in EFL classes?

2. Literature Review
There has been a heated debate regarding the role of L1 in EFL classroom. Very obvious is the fact that first language use has long been a neglected resource in second and foreign language teaching. This seems to be due to the widespread belief that using students' first language in EFL classroom hinders the process of learning. However, this belief was questioned by practitioners of the bilingual approach, who called for a re-examination of the role of L1. Cook (2001, p.32), for instance, stated that "the first language can be a useful element in creating authentic L1 (foreign and second language) users rather than something to be shunned at all costs".

Although growing numbers of practitioners and researchers see that L1 use in ESL and EFL is a valuable strategy to facilitate learning and teaching process (e. g Cook ,2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Burden, 2000; Weshler, 1997; Harbord, 1992). The role of the mother tongue is still restricted. This issue is largely relevant in foreign language educational context, where exposure to English is rather limited, thus, the classroom appears to be the main source of input of TL learners. However, the claim that the classroom is the only source for TL exposure in an FL setting has also been challenged (Sawin, 2018; Shin, 2019).

Language acquisition is the process through which we are able to acquire how to speak and use language in expressive ways to communicate. Ever since this area was recent, little knowledge could be provided regarding language acquisition. Thus, two main hypothetical approaches to child language acquisition can be cited; all of them have evidence, but none can fully explain the phenomenon of child language acquisition.

2.1 Imitation and Positive Reinforcement
This view sees language acquisition as a matter of stimulus response. Children learn and acquire language by imitation and repetition of the sounds they hear. Language acquisition is strengthened by correction and positive reinforcement. Skinner (1957), as being one of the pillars of the behaviourism theory, was one of the first scholars who provided some clarifications on the issue of language acquisition. He focused on the importance of the atmosphere stimulus response in the process of language evolution. Skinner claimed that thanks to the behaviourist reinforcement principles, children acquire language. Conversely, this hypothesis could not be taken fully into account for the fact that children often make intelligent grammatical errors produce sentences that they have never heard.

2.2 Innateness of Linguistic Features

This concept is associated with the works done by Noam Chomsky. He asserted that children are born with an innate capability for acquiring human language. Children discover the grammar of their language based on their own instinctive grammar that Chomsky called Universal Grammar, which is the basis upon which human languages are constructed. In addition, he presumed that a child is already programmed to acquire any language and believed that thanks to the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which is an inherent mechanism, the infant is able to acquire the language exposed to. Nevertheless, the problem with this theory of innateness is that Chomsky has reduced language to just its grammar and neglected meaning. The environment where the child is raised could have a critical impact on language acquisition.

2.3 Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the intellectual field of query that investigates the human capacity to learn languages. It studies a wide variety of complex phenomena that lead to enormous outcomes while learning a new language in different contexts. SLA began in the late 1960s as an emerging interdisciplinary that took from diverse linguist branches borrowed (teaching, and psychology etc…). After a few decades of growth, it had placed itself through numerous researches as an independent discipline (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

2.4 Monolingual Education

Monolingual refers to the type of education system in which only one language is used as a medium of instruction and communication in the classroom. This means that all classes and exams are conducted and evaluated merely in terms of language. In monolingual education system, students are expected to have a high level of proficiency in the language of instruction, which may create a barrier for students who come from linguistic minority backgrounds or who are learning language as a second language.

In many parts of the world, the use of a single language has been promoted as a means of establishing national identity and cultural unity. For example, in the 19th and 20th centuries, many countries in Europe and Latin America adopted monolingual policies that emphasize the use of a single national language in education, government, and culture. Ultimately, the effectiveness of monolingual education depends on a variety of factors, including the linguistic context, educational goals, and the specific needs and backgrounds of the students. It is important for the educational systems to carefully consider these factors when deciding the appropriate language policies to adopt.

2.5 Bilingual Education

Bilingual education is an educational approach that aims to provide students with instruction in two languages, typically their native language and a second language. The goal of bilingual education is to help students become proficient in both languages, and to develop academic proficiency in both languages as well.

Bilingual education programs can provide many benefits for students, including improved academic achievement, increased cognitive flexibility, and enhanced cultural awareness. However, bilingual education also requires careful planning, as it can be challenging for the instructional needs of students in two different languages. Effective bilingual education programs require skilled teachers, appropriate instructional materials, and ongoing support and resources for students and families. Even we can think that bilingualism is new born, yet it is a part of humanity debates. In the time of exploration and colonization, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English movements had transported their army, their family, their culture and their language too.

2.6 Related Studies

In relation to the on-going debate about using (L1) in EFL classrooms, many researches and studies have been conducted all over the world. These previous studies give the paper its real value in English language teaching field. Here some of the studies that have been conducted in different countries.

At first, a study was conducted in 2009 at the National University of Laos by Sauvannasy Bonangeune titled "Using (L1) in teaching vocabulary to Low English proficiency level". This study revealed that the mother tongue had a positive impact on the learners. In 2012, another study was conducted by Eleanor Carson and Hidenori Kashihara at Hiroshima City University under the topic "Using L1 in the L2 Classroom: From Students' Perspective". The Japanese study goes in line with the mentioned one. Same things to the recent study conducted by Eman Rasheed Ali (2022) at the Open Educational College in Bagdad. The study was published in Al-Adab Journal December 2022. The study is titled "Teachers` attitude Towards the Use of Arabic (L1) in Primary EFL Classrooms in Iraq".

2.7 The Sociolinguistic Situation in Morocco

The Moroccan society today is the result of the historical trajectory and events in the past. Linguistic environment in Morocco is characterized by its relation with the colonial countries that invaded not only Morocco but also the whole Arab world. Being so close to the European continent, the linguistic influence was seen enormous in the north of Morocco; however, it has always kept the Arab and Berber language as the root. The only distinction between these two languages were their geographical area, while Arabic was the language of commerce of Rabat and Fes, Berber was principal in rural areas.

In the late nineties, French as a new entry in the linguistic picture appeared and dominated Morocco's political and economic sphere. The colonizer, French, integrate Morocco into their colony and after taking control of it, French became the official language, used in all crucial fields. As a result, the Arab status was seen as the low language in the Moroccan society. Once Morocco gained the independence, the government worked to enforce Arabization gets back to its previous status and to reclaim its heritage. Making the Arabic language national and official in Morocco was not just to reclaim the identity but also to fight back the injurious effects of French colonialism. The education was the first platform where the basic objectives of Arabization process were found on. The linguistic scene in Morocco is full of languages that enrich the literature view and gives mixer pot of speakers in Moroccan society.

2.7.1 Moroccan Arabic

It is the widely spread spoken language in Moroccan society. It is neither the official language nor used as a tool in the education curriculum. Despite being the mother tongue of the majority of the Moroccan population, the Moroccan Arabic (*Darija*) is still seen as the vernacular that is acquired at home. This later has brought great challenges to children in their second language. It has a lot of similarities with Standard Arabic in the alphabet, yet, there are huge differences in lexical, phonetic, morphological, and syntactic elements. Moroccan Arabic (*Darija*) is still viewed as the lowest language with regard to other exclusive languages like French, English and Berber. For the reason that they mostly use *Darija* in just social and familial communication, not part of the academic and professional settings.

2.7.2 Berber

Tamazight is regarded as the original and the oldest language of Morocco. It is an ethnic identity for those who speak Berber. Generally, those who speak only Berber are mostly illiterate or the rate of their illiteracy is high level. Just a few years ago, Berber was integrated into the national educational program. There are three main known dialects of Tamazight: Tarifit (Rif), Tamazight (Atlas), and Tashelhit (Sous). It has a script called Tifinagh. Along ago, Berber language was considered as language to the uneducated lower class, yet now it has gained more ground.

2.7.3 Standard Arabic

Standard Arabic is the first language of education in Moroccan schools. It is the language of the Quran and is used in the Islamic religion practices. It has a big resemblance to classical Arabic. Children and youth generations are exposed to Standard Arabic when they attend the Quranic pre-school (jame3, Lemsside). It is seen as the link that attached the Moroccan society with their religion (Islam).

2.7.4 French

Since the French colonization, the French policy was to modernize the Moroccan nation and to indoctrinate the certainty that French language is much superior to the others. The high layer of Moroccan society looked forward to learning it as to take benefits as well as to be considered among the elites. Berbers and common people were excluded because they were regarded as the lowest layer in Moroccan society. The goal of the colonial policy in what concern education was to implement the French language as the only medium of instruction. It was a planned strategy to make it the official language of the government, of education and of the economy as well.

2.7.5 Spanish

The geographic closeness is the main factor, which has influenced the bilateral effect of both countries; however, Spanish civilization is largely affected than Moroccan society due to the Moorish presence in every single detail of the Spanish language. While in the Moroccan language, the loan is in a small quantity of lexicon, which is seen obviously in the tiny role played by the Spanish language in the educational territory programs.

After defining key concepts that are related to the study, the previous studies mentioned are interested in the same field of this research. This gives us proof that the present study has its importance and value in the English language teaching sphere. The following chapter will be devoted to research methodology, the study of settings, participants and sampling are presented in addition to research instruments used in collecting data and methods used in analyzing them.

3. Methodology
The present study falls within the field of English language teaching. Particularly, this study aims to investigate the students' attitudes towards the use of Moroccan Arabic in the EFL classes. Taking into account the broad amount of data that was gathered during the process, the study adopts a mixed method research design. The choice of mixed method approach is supported with the nature of the instruments used. A questionnaire for students was used as a primary tool for data collection. The questions were designed using Google Form application, as it is a practical tool for describing and analysing the results. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were used as a secondary method for data collection.

The study conducted in the region of Beni Mellal- Khenifra covers both private and public schools. Convenience sampling was chosen in collecting the data from the participants. 132 high school students of first, second and third-year levels participated in the study. Accordingly, students belonging to the four institutions under investigation were contacted directly, and briefed about the interview questions and the purpose of the research. Additionally, snowballing sampling was used to gather data from participants belonging to Tarik and Aboulkasem Zayani high schools in Khenifra province because I did not have a chance to meet them directly. Additionally, seven teachers were interviewed to evaluate their perception of using Moroccan Arabic Darija in their EFL classes. This mixed method approach helps in providing reliable and trustworthy results.
Google Forms platform was used to make it more practical and easier to administer and fill in the questionnaire. This exploratory research study seeks to explore the students' perspective on using Arabic (Darija) in English classrooms. In this study SPSS is used to analyze the quantitative data derived from the questionnaire and thematic content analysis to analyze the qualitative data derived from the interviews.
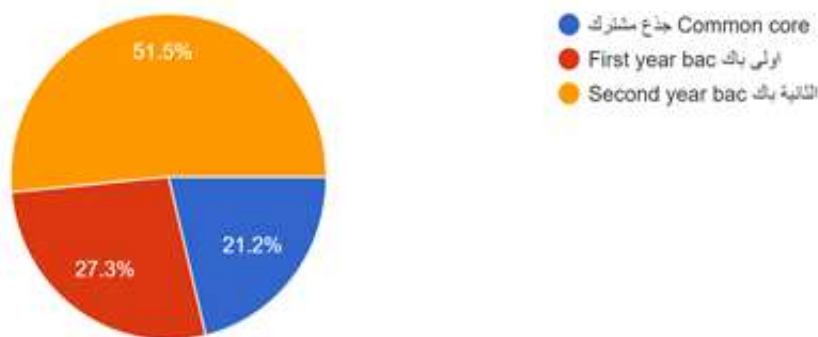
4. Results and Discussion
4.1 Results
The results derived from teachers' interviews are presented and analysed qualitatively.

4.1.1 Quantitative results
The educational level of participants

Figure 1: Distribution of the educational level of the students

The participants in the study are first, second and third year's high school students. More than half of them belong to the second year of the baccalaureate, represented by a percentage of 51, 5% (68 students), followed by the first year of the baccalaureate, represented by 27,3% (36 students), and common core characterized by 21,2 % (28 students).
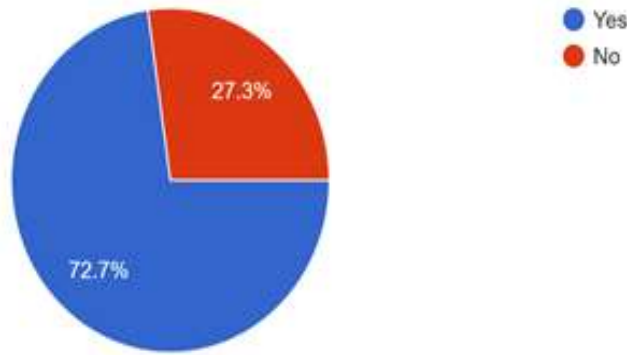
Figure 2: Distribution of the students' attitudes towards the use of Darija

This graph reveals that 96 members of the study are with the use of Moroccan Arabic (Darija) (72, 7%), while 27% are against, represented by 36 participants.
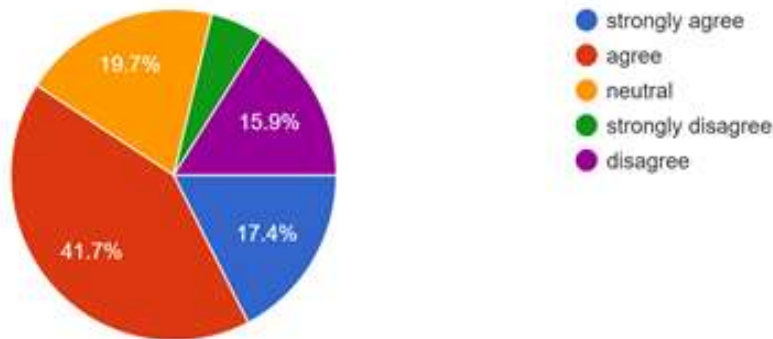

Figure 3: The importance of using Darija in EFL classrooms.

 It is obvious that more than half of the responses, or 41, 7%, consider that the use of (Darija) in EFL classrooms helps them in the process of learning. This point of view is contradicted by 22, 9 % who consider it useless. What is interesting is that a significant percentage of 19, 7% do not have a clear opinion about the matter.
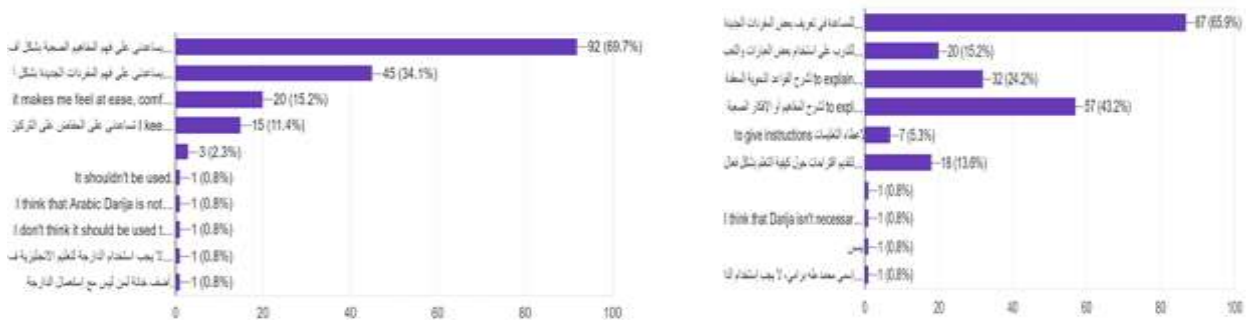

Figure 4 and 5: When the use of (Darija) is necessary

The two graphs highlight where and when Moroccan Arabic (*Darija*) should be used in EFL classrooms. The majority of students who participated in this study, viewed that the use of (*Darija*) helps them to understand new vocabulary used by teachers. In addition to what has been stated, many students believe that the use of (*Darija*) increases students' understanding, particularly, difficult ideas and grammar rules.
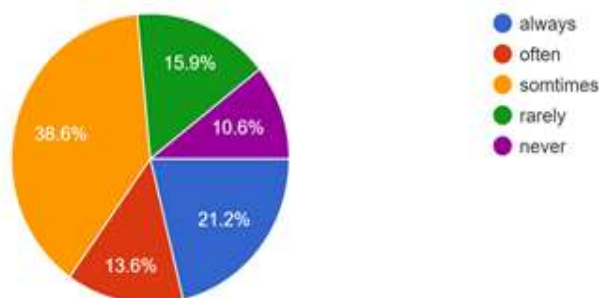
Figure 6: Distribution of teachers' use of (Darija) in EFL classrooms.
It is noticed that the teachers' use of (*Darija*) fluctuates greatly from sometimes (38%) to always (21%).

4.1.2 Qualitative results

Question 1: Do you agree that the mother tongue (*Darija*) should be excluded from the EFL classroom?
The results of the first question in the interview showed that the majority of teachers were against the exclusion of Moroccan Arabic from the EFL classroom. They claimed that there are a lot of gaps only the mother tongue can fill. Moreover, if the exclusion of *Darija* is possible by teachers during class, when learning English, it is impossible to erase the existence of mother tongue from the student mind where the learning process takes place. The interview shows that five of the seven teachers who participated in the interview are against the exclusion of *Darija* from EFL classes.

Question 2: Do you allow your students to use Moroccan Arabic in class? Why/why not?
The second question in the interview revealed that five teachers do not allow their students to use their mother tongue *Darija* in classes because they consider that student' use of his/her native language deprives him/her from the benefit of interaction with the target language. In addition, the exposure to the target language gives students more self-confidence, enhances the learning process as well as helping to develop their listening skills. Teachers claim that this exposure gives more opportunities to speak and communicate which is the main key to perfect pronunciation.

Question 3: Do you think that the level of your students in English is affected by the mother tongue use?
The third question unified the teachers on one attitude toward the use of mother tongue. They all agree that the effect of the mother tongue varies depending on the teachers' amount of use. Accordingly, if the teacher overuses the Moroccan Arabic in his/her class it will have negative results on the students' performance for example:

- ✓ They will tend to use *Darija* instead of English.
- ✓ Their background will affect their performance.
- ✓ They cannot get familiar with the target language.
- ✓ They will build the knowledge of the second language with the assumption of the native language.

The majority of the students; quantitative results, agree with the use of Moroccan Arabic in EFL classroom. They consider *Darija* as a practical way that can help in the process of learning. They claim that the use of *Darija* can facilitate learning new things and overcoming learning obstacles. The teachers' perspectives; qualitative results, go hand in hand with students' views. Five out of seven teachers agree with the use of *Darija* in the classroom in a restricted way. They claim that *Darija* should be used only by teachers and not frequently. They refused the total exclusion of *Darija* from the class. Yet, the excessive use is not desirable. Laziness will be the direct effect of frequent exposure to mother tongue in the classroom. That is to say, if the teacher moderates the use of the mother tongue during classes, the results will be positive in favor of both teachers and students, for instance:

-The student is able to express his/herself easily.
-The student can interact without any inhibition.
-The student gets the sense that learning language is a positive experience.
-The teacher saves more time for other high level tasks while using mother tongue.

4.2 Discussion

It is clear that the majority of the students are with the use of *Darija* in the classroom. The study reveals that students really appreciate the use Moroccan Arabic *Darija*. They consider it as a tool which helps them for better understanding. Most of the participants claim that they need the teachers' code-switching between English and *Darija* in their classes to explain difficult and new terms. Moreover, new grammar lessons require explanation in *Darija*, as most of the participants confirmed. From what is mentioned, we can assert that the use of *Darija*, or mother tongue, in general affects positively the process of learning in EFL classrooms. Accordingly, four teachers viewed that the level of students determines when *Darija* should be used. They explained that some abstract concepts need to be translated into the mother tongue. All that will contribute to facilitating of teacher task and engaging the maximum number of students in the learning process. The findings of this research question have shown that the use of *Darija* in specific and predetermined cases is inevitable.

Despite the great support that the use of *Darija* receives, the frequency with which it should be used differs from one part to another. Students prefer more use, while teachers consider limiting it in few cases as an effective way to integrate the student smoothly in new language sphere. Therefore, the use of Moroccan Arabic *Darija* should be restricted to few cases; teachers and students level are the main determinants for this. From this question, it is clear that the gap between students and teachers is widening and must be bridged to bring the points of view closer.

On the other hand, the teachers' perspectives are in line with students' attitude. But what is remarkable is that all teachers who participated in the interview claim that the use should be restricted only to teachers. They added that students' use of *Darija* in EFL classrooms will lead to a defect in the process of learning. In relation to what has been mentioned, the study of (Khairunnisa & Lukmana, 2020) revealed a similar motivation that was found from the teachers' perception, where they felt that L1 was more effective to make corrections). These results go in line with the present study.

5. Conclusion

To improve the educational field of our country, the efforts of all stakeholders must be combined, each according to his position and responsibility. The study revealed that EFL classes are strongly attached to the use of mother tongue in teaching practices. Teachers support restricting the use of mother tongue. Teachers should take into consideration students' level. They are obliged to engage the students actively in the process of learning a foreign language. They should collaborate with their students to build lessons and bridge the gap among them. This creative method will make the student aware of his or her value in the learning process. Teachers also have to work on low level students because they can affect badly those high achievers' students. The use of mother tongue should be linked to students' needs. Teachers ought to know how and when it should be used. No one can deny that supervisors have an important role in the teaching process. Therefore, they need constantly and continuously to control the process. Holding regular training sessions for teachers can help to understand students' cognitive factors and know how to adjust to global development and changes. Additionally, holding meetings in which both students and teachers participate may make the task easier for inspectors to know the deficiencies in order to remediate them.

5.1 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research:

Despite its relevance, this study used a limited number of teachers who participated in the interview; therefore, the study findings can't be generalized. Moreover, the researchers focused only on four schools belonging to one region in Morocco to collect data. They should have chosen different regions throughout the country to get a holistic image about the status and benefits of using L1 in EFL Moroccan classrooms Furthermore, using the Moroccan Arabic (Darija) to teach English is not always useless. As previously mentioned most the interviewed teachers admitted that using the first language from time to time could be useful and beneficial. They need just to be trained on how to use the native language correctly. Future researchers should consider these limitations so that their results can be generalized to benefit both students and educators regarding the use of the mother tongue in Moroccan EFL classrooms to support learning. In addition to that, upcoming studies should address the issue of the need for teachers' trainings on how to utilize L1 effectively in their classes.

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