

Language Education Policy of Distance Learning Classes of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract—This is a quantitative study that focuses on the language education policy of distance learning classes with particular attention to the policies regarding the use of the first language in teaching the second language. Previous studies show that the viewpoint of teachers and students, who are involved in distance learning, towards policies of the English language departments of Saudi universities has not been explored before. The main objective of this paper is investigating teachers' and students' awareness of the English department's policy regarding L1 in distance learning classes and the participants' attitudes towards using L1 in the distance learning classes of L2. Teachers of English as a foreign language with various academic ranks and undergraduate students from different colleges took part in this study. The main research tool of this study is an online questionnaire. The same questionnaire was given to the two types of participants. Data analysis shows that the majority of the participants were not familiar with the policy of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in distance learning classes. Data analysis indicates that both teachers and students acknowledged that they use L1 in the distance learning classes. On the other hand, half of the teachers contended that L1 enhances students' comprehension in the distance learning classes whereas the vast majority of the students supported this argument. Policy-makers in the English language department are invited to implement an "English-mainly" policy that perceives students as bilinguals.

Index Terms—language education policy, first language, second language, distance learning classes, English as a foreign language

I. INTRODUCTION

Saudi universities have begun to use the Blackboard system a few years before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Alzahrani and Sheirah (2021) revealed that starting from 2014 University of Ha'il, one of the Saudi universities, added, in the annual evaluation of its faculty members, the effective use of the Blackboard system in the educational process. In March 2020, the Saudi Ministry of Education, in its attempts to fight the spread of COVID-19, suspended traditional education and started distance learning. This included the studied university where it suspended traditional classes and started to use the Blackboard system to provide distance learning education. Nonetheless, stakeholders were not familiar with many significant features of the Blackboard system, such as virtual classes and exams (Altameemi & Alomaim, 2022). A few years after the end of the pandemic, familiarity of stakeholders at the Saudi universities with the Blackboard system has improved to a large extent. Saudi universities, including the studied university, have produced manuals, conducted workshops and published videos to explain the features of the Blackboard system. For example, the studied university has continued to conduct some of its undergraduate courses via distance learning using the Blackboard system even after the end of the pandemic.

Alomaim (2019) studied an English language center of a preparatory year program in one of the Saudi universities. Alomaim (2019) revealed that the language education policy (LEP) does not allow the first language (L1) in the classes that teach English as a foreign language (EFL). Nonetheless, Alomaim (2019) found out that the teachers were not certain about this policy and they did not implement it. Alomaim and Altameemi (2022) also discovered that students were not familiar with the LEP regarding the use of L1. Alomaim and Altameemi (2022) suggested that switching from traditional classes to distance learning classes and the loss of face-to-face interaction positively influenced students' attitude towards the use of L1 in the EFL classes. This study aims to expand Alomaim's (2019) and Alomaim and Altameemi's (2022) studies. The main objective of this paper is to compare and contrast the viewpoints of both teachers and students, who are involved in the distance learning classes of EFL, about the LEP of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of the second language (L2). This study will also detect the perspective of teachers and students about the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Haugen (1959) developed the term language planning. Language planning refers to explicit attempts that target influencing the linguistic behavior of others (Cooper, 1989). Language planning consists of status, corpus and

acquisition planning. Acquisition planning that was created by Cooper (1989) concentrates on the expansion of the number of speakers of languages (Ferguson, 2006).

Language policy emerged from language planning to highlight the beliefs, practices, and regulations that influence peoples' use of language (García, 2015). Language policy may include regulations and practices that are used to accomplish any changes to language planning (Baldauf, 2005). Language policies could be in a form of de facto policies (Spolsky, 2004).

Education is perceived by language planning as the major area of implementing language policy (Hofmann, 1991; Lo Bianco, 2010). As a result, LEP is considered a branch of language policy (Paulston & Heidemann, 2006). For example, language planning uses the educational system to introduce new languages (Cooper, 1989). As a result, acquisition planning has been renamed as LEP (Shohamy, 2006). LEP plays the role of a mechanism that is implemented in educational contexts to develop de facto language practices (Shohamy, 2006).

One of the major focuses of LEP is establishing rules about the use of L1 and L2 in educational institutions (Shohamy, 2006). Using L1 in the classes of L2 is considered a deficit behavior to a large extent by policy-makers (Raschka et al., 2009). Nonetheless, Almayez (2022) discovered a significant discrepancy between teachers of EFL attitudes and pedagogical practices.

The Saudi Basic Law of Governance (constitution) defines the country as a monolingual country where Arabic is the only recognized language. The Saudi Ministry of Education (1995) describes Arabic as the medium of instruction in all the stages of education. The Saudi Council of Higher Education (2007) clarifies that Arabic is the medium of instruction in Saudi tertiary education, but universities are provided with permission to use a different language whenever a need arises. As a result, the vast majority of undergraduate majors in Saudi universities use English as the major language of instruction.

Language practice includes all linguistic choices that a person selects, whether these selections are conscious or not (Spolsky, 2004). Classroom practices reflect policies (Paulston & Heidemann, 2006). However, language policy does not always influence language practice (Spolsky, 2004). Therefore, language policies should consider the positive participation of the people whom these policies target (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007).

Researchers have started calls for LEPs to consider the possible advantages of using L1 to teach and learn L2 (Garton, 2014; Raschka et al., 2009). The global celebration of multilingualism has positively influenced the proposals to perceive learners of L2 as bilinguals (Hall & Cook, 2012; Hornberger & Link, 2012; Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2005). McMillan and Rivers (2011) advocate an "English-mainly" policy. Nevertheless, permitting L1 in the classes of L2 should not develop an overuse of it by teachers and/or students (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009).

In the context of this paper, Arabic is the L1 including the majority of the teachers and students in the field of EFL. Hence, this study focuses on how Arabic influences the field of EFL education within Saudi Arabia. L1 could be a positive help to students' learning of L2 (Butzkamm, 2003). L1 could facilitate the teacher/student relationship (Franklin, 1990; Harbord, 1992; Qian et al., 2009; Tien, 2009). Interaction in the classes of L2 could be improved by L1 (Eldridge, 1996; Greggio & Gil, 2007; Harbord, 1992; McMillan & Rivers, 2011; Rezvani & Rasekh, 2011).

On the other hand, a great deal of criticism has arisen to attack the use of L1 in the classes of L2. Some scholars argue that permitting L1 would obstruct students' access to crucial input in L2 (Ellis, 1984). It is also possible that students would be distracted from the lesson by their overuse of L1 (Jakobsson & Rydén, 2010). Some scholars warn that permitting L1 may lead to producing incorrect sentences in L2 (Krashen, 1982).

The studied university has suspended the preparatory year program for most of its undergraduate majors and shifted to foundation year instead. The foundation year includes general requirement courses that prepare students for their undergraduate education. Among these courses are general EFL courses that are taught by the faculty members of the English language department. Distance learning via the Blackboard system is used to teach these EFL courses. The viewpoint of teachers and students within the field of distance learning toward the LEP is a gap in the literature. Thus, this paper explores the perspective of teachers and students regarding the LEP of distance learning classes focusing on the effect of L1 in teaching L2 and the participants' attitude towards the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2. This is a quantitative study that explores the perspective of teachers and students in the foundation year of a university in Saudi Arabia to answer two major questions:

1. What is the degree of teachers' and students' awareness about the LEP of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2?
2. What are the language practices of teachers and students in the distance learning classes of L2 during and after the classes of L2?

III. METHODOLOGY

The major focus of this paper is analyzing the perspectives of teachers and students who are involved in the distance learning of EFL towards the LEP of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in distance learning classes. This paper adopts a quantitative methodology. This paper took place in a Saudi university where it focused on two types of participants: teachers and students of EFL. The data of this study was collected between January and August 2023. The participants had to be involved in the distance learning courses of EFL during the period of data collection either as teachers or students.

Online questionnaires were submitted to the potential participants of this paper. Questionnaires were selected as the research tool for this study to ensure that the largest number of male and female members of the studied university would be included in the data collection. All the participants (teachers and students) were asked the same questions. Thus, thirty-two teachers of EFL and one hundred and forty students of EFL have participated in this paper. Figure 1 below highlights that 56.25% of the participating teachers and 62.14% of the participating students were female. On the other hand, Figure 1 reveals that 43.75% of the participating teachers and 37.86% of the participating students were male.

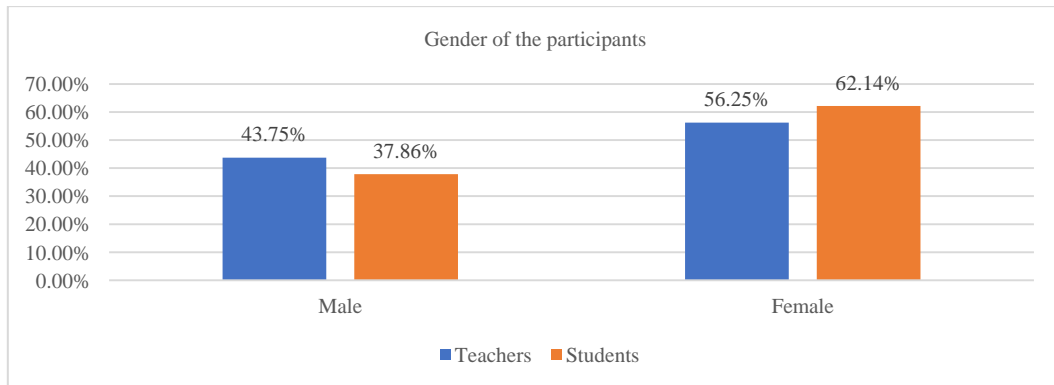


Figure 1. Gender of the Participants

The participating teachers in the questionnaire held various academic ranks. Figure 2 below shows the distribution of the academic ranks of the teachers. 12.50% of the teachers were associate professors, 46.88% of them were assistant professors, 25.00% of them were lecturers, 3.13% of them were language instructors and 12.50% of them were teaching assistants.

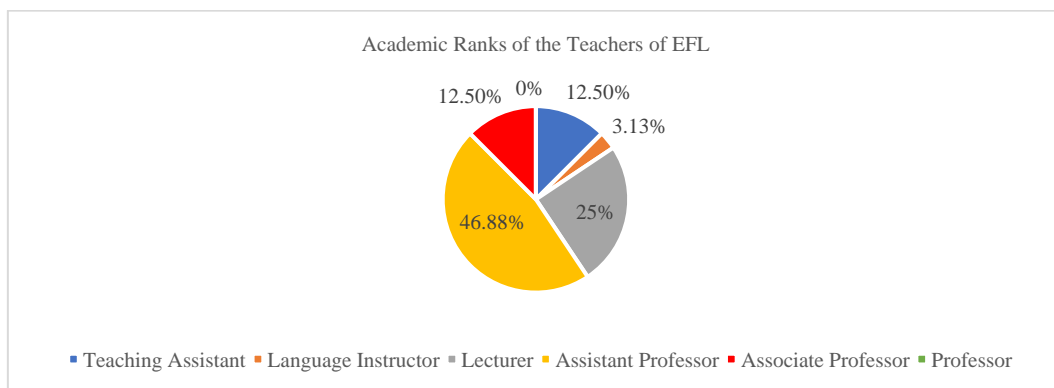


Figure 2. Academic Ranks of the Teachers of EFL

The participating students in the questionnaire represented the various colleges of the studied university. Figure 3 below indicates the distribution of the affiliated colleges of the students. 43.57% of them were from the College of Computer Science and Engineering, 22.86% were from the College of Sciences, 10.71% were from the College of Engineering, 10% were from the College of Arts, 7.86% were from the College of Business Administration, 2.14% were from the College of Education, 1.43% were from the College of Public Health and Health Informatics, 0.71% were from the College of Pharmacy, and 0.71% of them were from the College of Medicine.

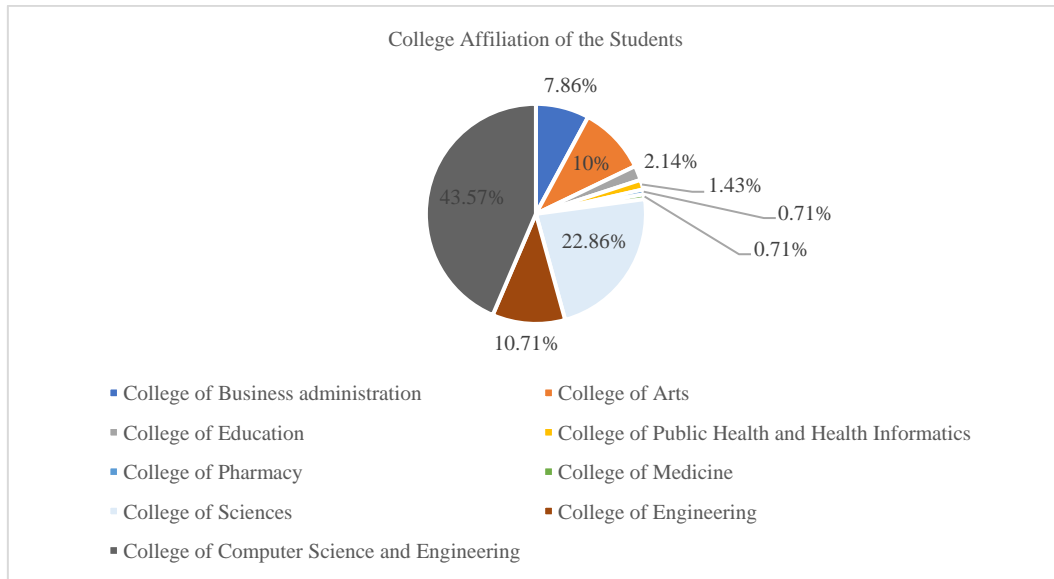


Figure 3. College Affiliation of the Students

The participants had the right to answer the questionnaires according to their convenience and their class schedules. The questionnaires were facilitated to the participants through writing them in both Arabic and English. The questionnaires were piloted before distributing them in order to test them and to be certain that they were linguistically clear. After piloting the questionnaires, necessary amendments were made to them.

The purpose of this study was explained to all the participants before signing a consent form. The participants had the right to refuse to participate without any consequences.

Data analysis of this study focused on analyzing the questionnaires from the perspectives of two types of participants. The first type was teachers of EFL who worked in a Saudi university whereas the second type was undergraduate students in the studied university. The questionnaires were deeply analyzed in order to explore the LEP of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning courses of EFL from the perspective of the participants. The deep data analysis assisted in acquiring an objective view of the data that would mirror the diversities of the participants' perspectives.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis of this paper involves analyzing the questionnaires with a particular focus on the two types of participants, the teachers of EFL and the undergraduate students. In the questionnaires, the participants revealed the extent of their awareness of the LEP of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning courses of L2 and the participants' report of teachers' and students' language practices in regard to using L1 in the distance learning classes of L2. Data analysis of the questionnaires focuses on comparing and contrasting the perspectives of the teachers with the perspectives of the students in light of their answers.

Figure 4 below indicates that most of the teachers and students suggested that they were fully aware of the nature of the LEP of the English language department regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning courses of L2. Figure 4 points out that the vast majority of the students (95%) claimed that they knew the policy whereas 62.50% of the teachers suggested that they were familiar with the policy.

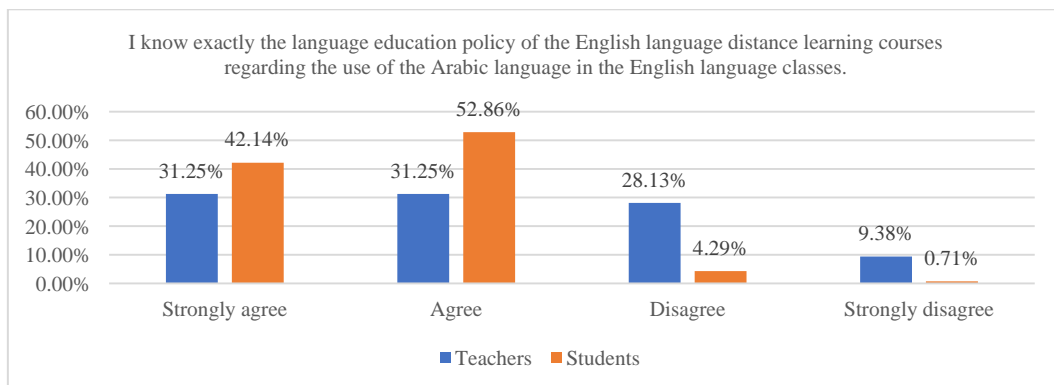


Figure 4. The Participants' Knowledge About the English Language Department's LEP Regarding the Use of L1 in the Distance Learning Classes of L2

Figure 5 below shows the comprehension of the participants of the English language department’s policy regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning courses. Figure 5 points out an indication of uncertainty among the teachers about the nature of this policy. 31.25% of teachers leaned towards believing that the policy permits using L1 to certain limits whereas half of the students (50%) anticipated that this was the policy. On the other hand, almost 25% of both the teachers and the students conceded that the nature of the English language department’s policy regarding the use of L1 in distance learning courses was not clear to them.

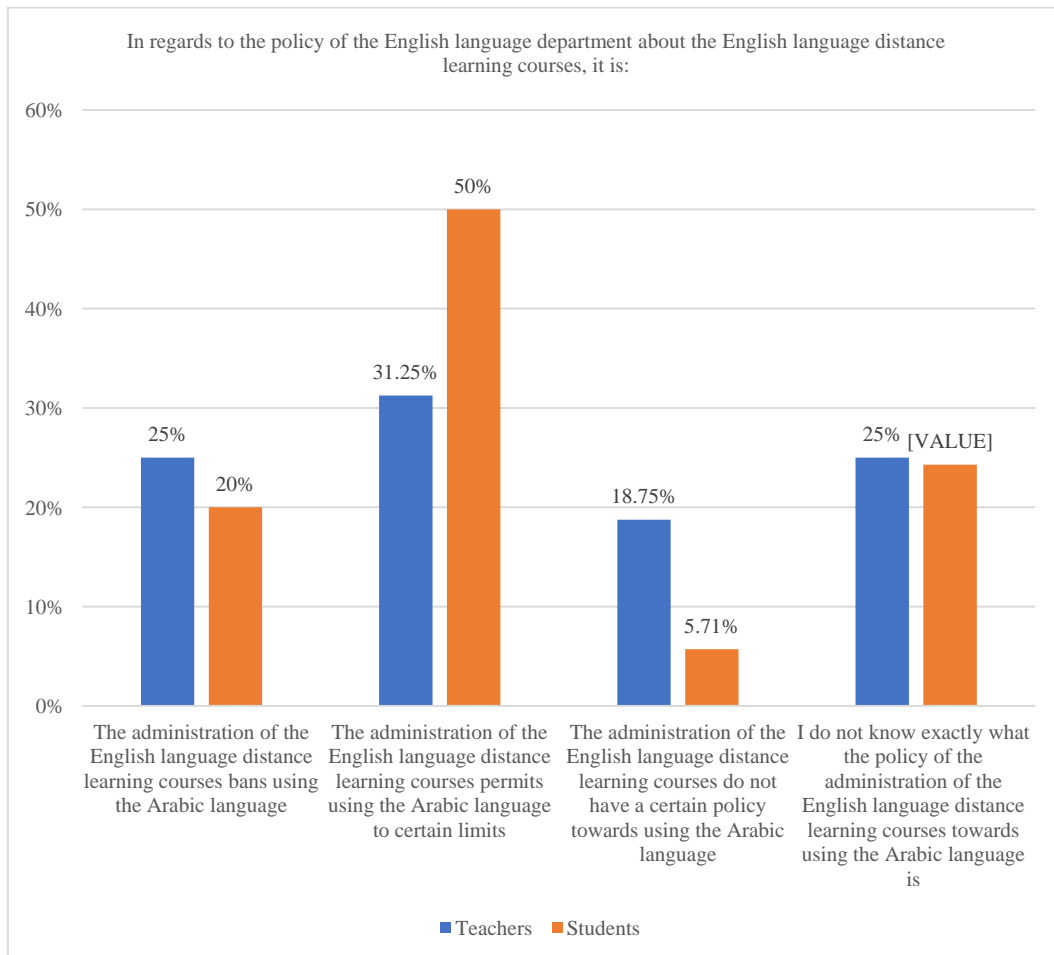


Figure 5. The Participants’ Comprehension of the English Language Department’s LEP Regarding the Use of L1 in the Distance Learning Courses of L2

In Figure 6 below, more than half of the teachers (53.13%) agreed with the proposal that the English language department’s LEP should allow the use of L1 in its distance learning classes. On the contrary, the vast majority of the students (85%) supported this suggestion.

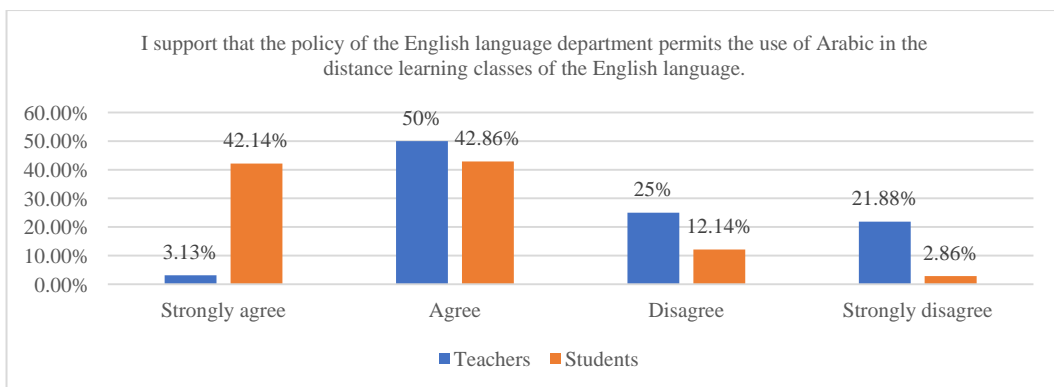


Figure 6. Participants’ Attitude Regarding the English Language Department’s LEP Towards the Use of L1 in the Distance Learning Classes of L2

Figure 7 below points out that most of the participants noted that L1 is used by teachers of EFL in the distance learning courses of L2. A roughly similar percentage of the participants, 62.50% of the teachers and 66.43% of the students shared this observation.

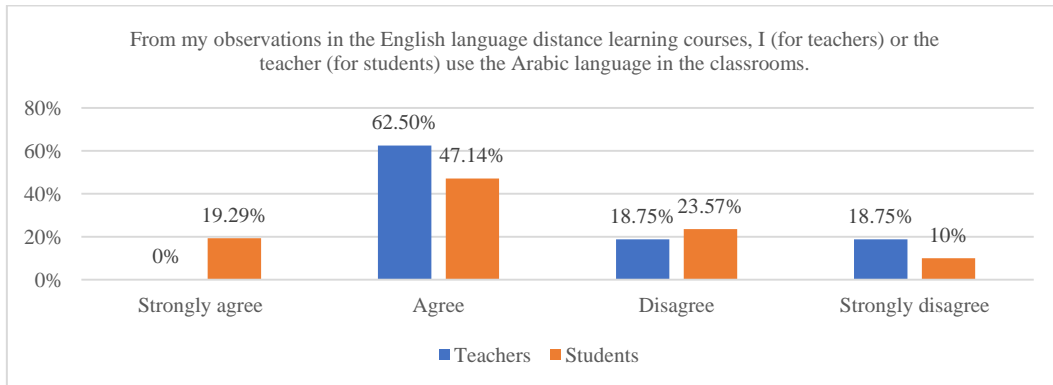


Figure 7. The Participants' Observations of the Teachers' Language Practices in the Distance Learning Courses of L2

Figure 8 below indicates that the majority of the participants, 90.63% of the teachers and 79.29% of the students, contended that, from their observations, L1 is used by students to interact with their teachers inside the distance learning courses of EFL.

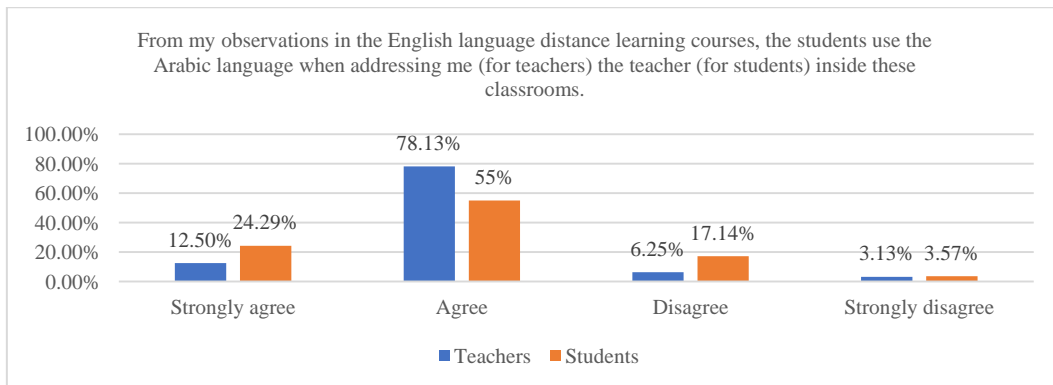


Figure 8. The Participants' Observations of Students' Language Practices With Teachers in the Distance Learning Courses of L2

In Figure 9 below, 84.38% of the teachers and 85% of the students asserted that, from their observations in the distance learning courses of L2, students use L1 when addressing other students.

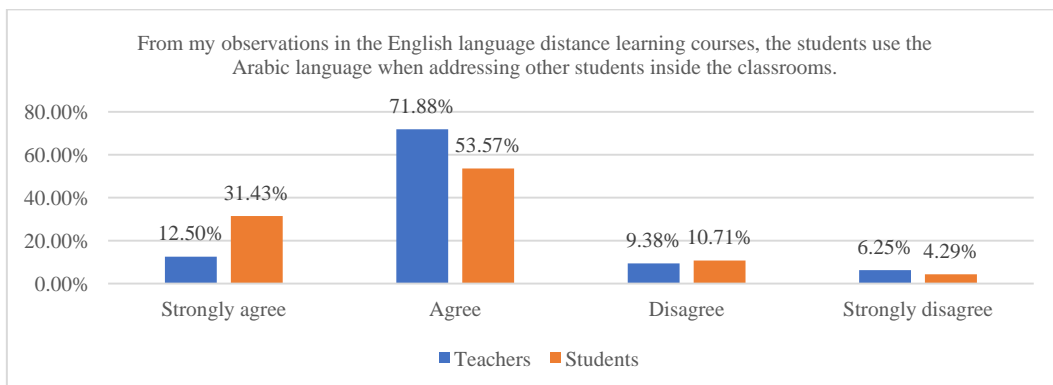


Figure 9. The Participants' Observations of Students' Language Practices With Other Students in the Distance Learning Courses of L2

In Figure 10 below, the vast majority of the participants, 81.26% of the teachers and 84.29% of the students, revealed that L1 is used by teachers to interact with students after the end of the distance learning classes of L2.

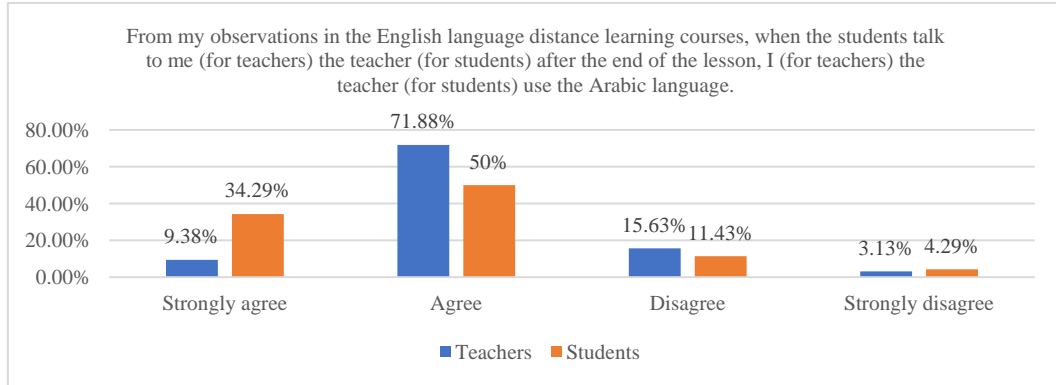


Figure 10. The Participants' Observations of Teachers' Language Practices After Distance Learning Classes of L2

Figure 11 below shows that most of the participants agreed that L1 was used by students during their interactions after the end of the distance learning classes of L2. 87.51% of the teachers and 91.43% of the students agreed with this statement.

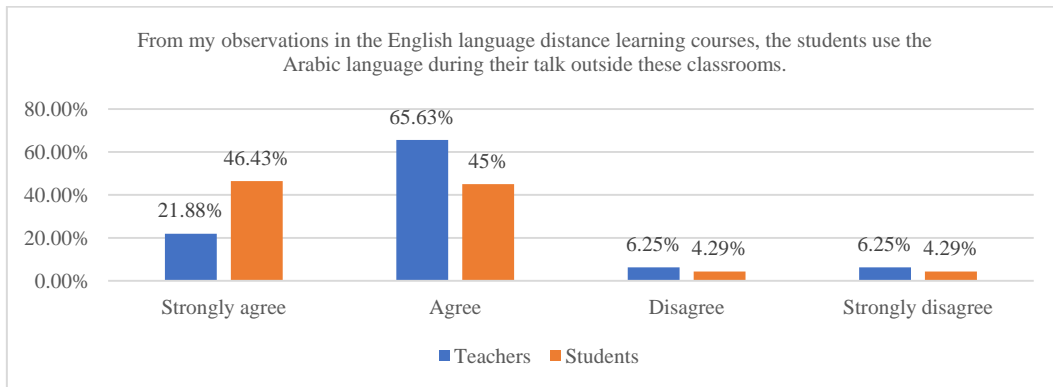


Figure 11. The Participants' Observations of Students' Language Practices With Other Students After Distance Learning Classes of L2

Figure 12 below indicates that only 50% of the teachers argued that using L1 in the distance learning courses of L2 would facilitate students' comprehension of the lessons. On the other hand, 90% of the students asserted that using L1 in the distance learning courses of L2 would facilitate their comprehension of the lessons.

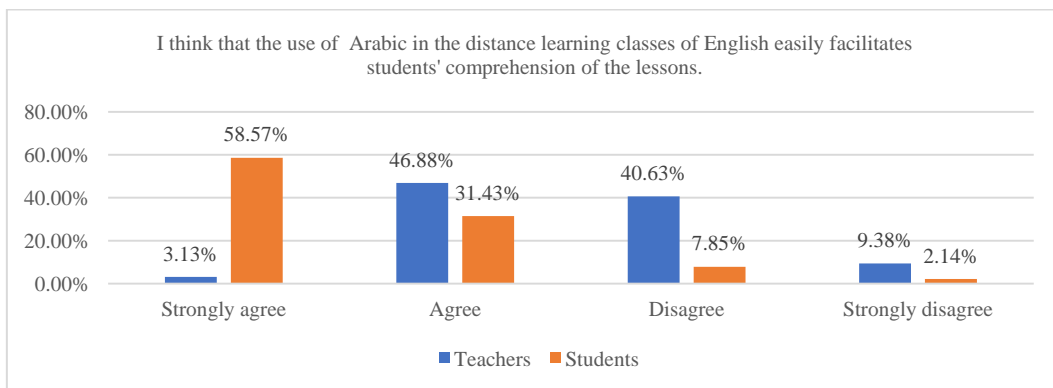


Figure 12. The Participants' Attitude Towards the Advantages of Using L1 in the Distance Learning Classes of L2

V. DISCUSSION

Data analysis of this paper highlights similarities and differences in regards to the perspectives of teachers and students within the field of Saudi distance learning of EFL. The vast majority of the students argued that they were familiar with the English language department's LEP regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2. Half of the students believed that the LEP permitted the use of L1 to certain limits whereas around a quarter of them admitted that they were not familiar with the nature of the policy (see for example Alomaim & Altameemi, 2022). On the other hand, most of the teachers believed that they knew exactly what the policy was, but the teachers did not agree on what the policy was. This is consistent with Alomaim's (2019) note that the teachers of EFL were not aware of the nature of the official LEP regarding the use of L1 in the classes of L2. It is possible that due to the recent

implementation of the distance learning courses in the studied university, the policy-makers in the English department did consider the nature of their LEP towards using L1 in the distance learning classes of L2 and whether they should implement the same policies of the traditional classes or not. For instance, Alomaim (2019) and Alomaim and Altameemi (2022) discovered that policy-makers considered LEP of using L1 in the traditional classes of L2 as a de facto that was not written or announced to stakeholders. Data analysis of this study highlights that relatively more than half of the teachers agreed that the English language department's LEP should allow the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2 whereas the vast majority of the students supported this suggestion. This is in line with Spolsky's (2004) argument that language policy does not necessarily affect language practice.

Data of this paper points out that most of the teachers and students, to various degrees, noted that L1 was used by both teachers and students during and after the distance learning classes. Only half of the teachers agreed that L1 is useful in distance learning classes. This observation supports Almayez's (2022) finding of the crucial discrepancy between teachers of EFL attitudes and pedagogical practices. Teachers' attitude supports Ellis's (1984) viewpoint that students' access to crucial input in L2 would be obstructed by the permission of using L1. On the contrary, the vast majority of the students agreed with the argument that L1 is useful in the distance learning classes of L2. Students' attitude could be attributed to the fact that they lack face-to-face interaction with their teacher to improve their education (see for example Alomaim & Altameemi, 2022).

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper will conclude with answering its questions. In answering the first question, data analysis indicates that both the teachers and the students were not familiar with the English language department's LEP regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2. This finding suggests that policy-makers in the English language department did not consider clarifying the department's policy regarding the use of L1 in the distance learning classes.

In answering the second question, data analysis reveals that both the teachers and the students agreed that L1 is actually used during and after the distance learning classes of L2 by both the teachers and the students. However, teachers did not consider L1 useful in distance learning classes of L2. On the other hand, students agreed that L1 is useful in distance learning classes of L2. It is possible that teachers were concerned about seizing every opportunity of exposing students to L2 whereas students were concerned about using every tool that would enhance the learning process of L2 including L1.

The major contribution of this paper to knowledge is exploring the perspective of both teachers and students, who are involved in distance learning classes of L2, towards the English language department's LEP regarding the use of L1 in these classes. This paper reveals that the viewpoints of stakeholders, including teachers and students who are involved in distance learning classes, have not been considered by policy-makers in the English language department. This paper calls for policy-makers in the English language department to first consider the fact of shifting from traditional classes to distance learning classes in the LEP of the department. The various differences between traditional classes and distance learning classes including, for instance, face-to-face interaction that is available in the traditional classes, but not in the distance learning classes should be taken into consideration in the LEP of the department. In addition, the LEP of the English language department should consider the viewpoints of both teachers and students who are involved in the distance learning classes. This could be achieved via various tools that provide stakeholders with the opportunity to express their perspectives towards the LEP, such as questionnaires. Students should be treated by the LEP of the English language department as bilinguals who have the ability to speak two languages (see for example Hornberger & Link, 2012). As a result, the English language department's policy is urged to become an "English- mainly" to celebrate students' multilingualism (see for example McMillan & Rivers, 2011). Nevertheless, overuse of L1 should not be encouraged by this policy (see for example Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). Data of this paper were collected from one of the Saudi universities that use distance learning classes to teach EFL. A similar study should be done in the other Saudi universities that use distance learning classes in teaching EFL to explore their LEPs towards the use of L1 in the distance learning classes of L2.

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