Bilingualism in EFL Classrooms: Saudi Female Beginners' Reading Performance and Classroom Involvement

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ثنائية اللغة في فصول تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية: أداء القراءة للمبتدئات السعوديات وتفاعلهن في الفصل

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of a bilingual approach on the academic performance and classroom involvement/participation of level 1 English as a foreign language (EFL) reading comprehension students. Fifty female Saudi EFL students participated in the study. A reading comprehension test, classroom observation, and interviews served as data collection methods. The researcher used an independent samples t-test to analyze the test scores, and thematic content analyses to analyze the interviews and observation. The results show that bilingualism as a teaching strategy positively affects learners' academic performance, classroom participation, and involvement. The study also indicates that most participants perceived bilingualism as a useful teaching strategy to raise their exam scores. Recommendations for teaching EFL beginners, as well as for language learning and further research, were presented.

الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة تأثير النهج ثنائي اللغة على الأداء الأكاديمي والمشاركة للمتعلمات السعوديات في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للمستوى الأول، وقد شاركت في الدراسة خمسون طالبة سعودية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وتضمنت أدوات الدراسة اختبار قراءة والملاحظة الصفية والمقابلات، وتم تحليل البيانات باستخدام اختبار (ت) للعينات المستقلة للبيانات الرقمية، وتحليل المحتوى الوصفي للمقابلات والملاحظة الصفية. وأظهرت النتائج أن ثنائية اللغة، كإستراتيجية تدريس، تؤثر بشكل إيجابي على الأداء الأكاديمي للمتعلمات وكذلك على مشاركتهن في الفصل. كما أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن معظم المشاركات لديهن آراء إيجابية عن تأثير استراتيجية التدريس ثنائية اللغة على نتائج امتحاناتهن، وتم في نهاية البحث تقديم توصيات لتدريس مبتدئات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، وكذلك لتعلم اللغة والأبحاث المتعلقة بذلك.

1. Introduction

Bilingualism in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms is a natural phenomenon that arises from teachers' and students' needs to communicate. If teachers are not native English speakers, they will find themselves using this strategy to adapt to the teaching situation. As Modupeola (2013) believes, teachers do not perform this act of code-switching (i.e., alternating between languages) consciously; it is more of an automatic, unconscious act. This behavior, which arises subconsciously, is sometimes called 'translanguaging' between the interlocutors' languages. García (2009) describes translanguaging as the access made by bilingual speakers to "different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages" to communicate with maximum potential (p. 140).

Although this linguistic behavior facilitates communication, researchers have debated using it as a strategy in EFL teaching and learning contexts for decades. Some researchers have argued that bilingualism in EFL education has various benefits and functions (Almansour, 2016; Rabab'ah & Al-Yasin, 2017; Bhatti *et al.,* 2018; Mahdi & Almalki, 2019). Aoyama (2020) sees translanguaging as a powerful and useful strategy for language users to view their language choice as a part of their entire language repertoire. Moreover, as García (2009) indicates, in addition to its benefit for scaffolding instruction and making sense of learning and language, it is a general command that 21st century EFL students must achieve. This view shows that skilled bilingualism eventually ensures students' ability to communicate effectively with others worldwide and share one or more of their languages.

However, other researchers have advocated that teachers and students should use only the target language (TL; in this case, English) in EFL classrooms. Those researchers proposed Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis, which calls for exposing EFL learners to English comprehensible input. Based on this premise, these researchers believe that monolingual instruction is the optimal strategy for ensuring EFL learners' English acquisition; using the students' first language (L1) might hinder their learning English (Inbar-Lourie, 2010; Hall &Cook, 2012).

However, Krashen's hypothesis about the input itself also implies an argument for translanguaging in EFL teaching contexts. To make the TL input comprehensible to EFL beginners, the code-switching with L1 may be one appropriate strategy. Krashen (1982) states that, to be comprehensible, the input must be only one level above the learners' current level. He also states that when anxiety is high, it causes mental blocks that prevent the input from entering the learners' minds. Thus, if beginners to EFL reading receive 100% percent input, which is incomprehensible to them, they will not learn. They might lose confidence and develop mental blocks from the anxiety they feel under pressure.

Modupeola (2013) emphasizes that language teachers' use of translanguaging to elucidate teaching could eventually facilitate classroom instruction flow. He adds that translanguaging is a beneficial tool—aiding language teachers and accelerating students' language learning process, particularly for beginners first introduced to the TL's skillset. Ekmekçi (2015) indicates that EFL teachers use a bilingual approach to give instructions, develop strategies, and check comprehension. Pennycook (1994) calls monolingualism a "language [myth] of Europeans" (as cited in Ekmekçi, 2018:75). However, West (1962) indicates that monolingualism in some EFL classrooms may be due to a lack of bilingualism in native English speakers (as cited in Ekmekçi, 2018).

Thus, translanguaging, although not the only method, might be one strategy that EFL learners use to shed light on unknown information in reading passages. Research on reading comprehension has shown that, to understand a text, EFL learners must know an estimated 98%

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of the words in that text (Schmitt et al., 2011). For beginners, achieving such a level of comprehension is not as simple as for advanced learners, unless language teachers employ a teaching strategy that relies more on the learners' knowledge of their L1. According to Rose and Van Dulm (2006), clarification and expansion are two of the main functions of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms. Thus, it is evident that translanguaging helps clarify potential misunderstandings.

The dynamics of a language classroom reflect the effectiveness of a language instructional strategy. Researchers have described positive teacher–student interaction as shared acceptance, understanding, affection, trust, respect, care, and cooperation (Krause et al., 2006). Active involvement will stimulate learners' interest in the course material and encourage them to interact with the teacher. Favorable classroom environments depend on interaction and ingenuousness between teachers and students, which will eventually lead to the students' successful comprehension of the material.

In the Saudi context, bilingual language teachers subconsciously lean toward translanguaging in beginner language classrooms to make the lessons and instructions more comprehensible, making the classroom environment more dynamic and positive. Researchers in this EFL context have highlighted the usefulness of implementing the bilingual approach when teaching beginners (Alshammari, 2011; Alkatheery, 2014; Alrifa'i, 2014; Adil, 2019). Therefore, this paper attempts to add to the present literature in this field by investigating the impact of a bilingual approach on learners' performance and classroom engagement in a Level 1 reading comprehension course for female EFL beginners. The study aims to explore whether this approach is an effective strategy for boosting learners' academic performance and classroom interaction with their teacher and involvement/participation.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Perceptions, Uses, Types, and Functions of Bilingualism in EFL Classrooms:

As indicated above, there has been growing interest in investigating the perceptions of teachers and students towards employing bilingualism in EFL classes, and its uses, types, and functions. For example, Alshammari (2011) indicates that well-adjusted bilingualism in Saudi EFL classrooms benefits learning, and it might be crucial for improving learners' comprehension. Alkatheery (2014) confirms the existence of code-switching in Saudi EFL classrooms and has called for bilingualism as a vocabulary teaching strategy for college students.

Debreli and Oyman (2016) indicate that the EFL students had highly positive perceptions of including L1 in their second language (L2) classes, and that these perceptions were affected by their demographic characteristics. Students with lower levels of L2 proficiency had more positive perceptions of using L1 in the classroom. Additionally, Alrabah et al. (2016) show that although the teachers held negative attitudes toward utilizing L1 for L2 teaching in Kuwait, they did employ the learners' L1 in their EFL classrooms to serve affective, sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic functions.

Nukuto (2017) has identified three pedagogical functions for bilingualism in Japanese EFL classrooms: compensating for learners' lack of knowledge about the TL, setting up communicative activities in the TL, and transmitting sociocultural knowledge. Tan and Low (2017) also indicate that, in the EFL classrooms of a rural district in Malaysia, teachers generally held positive attitudes toward classroom bilingualism to serve functions related to the teachers' personas, clarification of topics, classroom management, and interpersonal

relationships. Tan and Low (2017) concluded that teaching experience and social background similarities/differences between teachers and their students significantly affected the teachers' attitudes towards classroom bilingualism. Therefore, the study highlighted the importance of considering the impact of socioenvironmental factors on using bilingualism in EFL classrooms.

More recently, Orhan and Aslan (2018) indicated that private Turkish Anatolian High School students in Turkey hold positive perceptions about using their L1 in EFL classes since it helps them understand new words and grammar, check comprehension, and communicate with their teachers. The researchers claimed that the "bilingual approach is inevitable to form a good rapport with the students at any level" (p. 187). In Libya, Adriosh and Razı (2019) pointed out that the teachers of undergraduate EFL students mainly use the target language, and switch to the learners' mother tongue only for limited purposes. They also indicated that both teachers and students prefer that code-switching when performing pedagogical and social functions.

Bozorgian and Luo (2018) concluded that a bilingual strategy is used by EFL teachers to serve pedagogical functions, manage their classrooms, and establish a good rapport with their learners. Narayan (2019) holds that bilingualism is a positive language teaching strategy that increases interaction and should be part of Indonesian EFL classroom discourse. This research has called for judicious use of bilingualism to integrate into EFL curricula. Aoyama (2020) has explored bilingualism among advanced Japanese high school students during communicative L2 activities in the EFL classroom and their perceptions towards L1 use. The findings identify five functions of students' bilingualism in fillers, back-channeling, asking for help, equivalents, and metalanguage. The results also show that the students' bilingualism helped them facilitate communication, complement their linguistic inabilities, and ask for help to compensate for resource deficits. Thus, Aoyama (2020) recommends that teachers follow a contextualized communicative teaching strategy in EFL classrooms, accompanied by bilingualism pedagogy.

2.2. Impact of the Bilingual Approach on EFL Teaching and Learning:

Few researchers have conducted studies concerning the bilingual approach's impact on EFL learners' performance and classroom interaction. Mahmoud (2012) has investigated the impact of the bilingual approach on EFL General English achievement among foundation-year students at King Abdul-Aziz University, Saudi Arabia. The findings reveal that this approach negatively impacted the learners' achievement. Therefore, Mahmoud (2012) calls for the monolingual approach and applying creative techniques (e.g., the inductive approach) to teach grammar—simplifying, miming, drawing, and acting to avoid using Arabic.

Naka (2014) examines the bilingual approach's impact on the students' performance at the University of Gjakova, Kosovo. The results show that the approach is a useful and effective strategy in foreign language acquisition. However, its usefulness depends on each student's language proficiency. Almansour (2016) investigated the bilingual approach's effectiveness as a grammar teaching strategy for Saudi Arabian female EFL learners. Although the test findings reveal that it was not helpful for teaching grammar to Saudi Arabian female EFL learners, the survey results indicate that they preferred this teaching strategy and thought they benefitted from its application.

In the same year, Enama (2016) compared the effects of monolingual and bilingual instruction among low-achieving bilingual EFL learners' performance in Cameroon. The results confirm that the experimental group scored better on both grammar and speaking tests after the

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experiment. Therefore, Enama (2016) concluded that bilingualism in Cameroon EFL classrooms is a useful scaffolding tool and does not hinder learning. One year later, Turnbull and Evans (2017) investigated the impact of bilingual post-reading discussions on the TL reading comprehension of intermediate-level EFL students in Japan. The findings revealed that the L1 discussion positively affected reading comprehension. Thus, the study recommended that teachers apply judicious use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms.

 More recently, Rahayu and Margana (2018) compared the effects of bilingual and monolingual instruction on the speaking achievements of 70 Indonesian, primary-level EFL, seventh-grade students. The findings revealed that monolingual instruction, as a teaching strategy, positively impacted the learners' speaking performance. Adil (2019) investigated EFL teachers' general views on L1 use in EFL teaching, its impact on the teaching of meaning, and the students' views on its use at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. He employed a mixed-methods data collection design: semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers and a survey to elicit the students' views. He found both positive and negative views for using bilingualism to teach meaning. Therefore, he concludes that although bilingualism is useful in clarifying the meanings of English vocabulary, it has some adverse effects and must be carefully administered by the teacher to ensure that the TL dominates the classroom as a medium of instruction.

3. Rationale and Research Questions

Based on this literature review and to the fullest extent of the researcher's knowledge, no one has, to date, investigated the impact of the bilingual approach as a teaching strategy on the Level 1 reading comprehension, academic performance, and classroom involvement and participation of female Saudi EFL beginners. The present study examines this impact. The researcher hopes that this study will offer useful insights to EFL teachers concerning bilingual instruction.

Based on the concept of bilingualism as a teaching strategy in EFL classes, the researcher's teaching experience, and the related literature, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- Does the bilingual approach, as a teaching strategy, positively impact the academic achievement of Level 1 reading comprehension of female Saudi EFL learners?
- Does the bilingual approach, as a teaching strategy, positively impact classroom student–teacher interaction and student involvement/participation?
- What are Level 1 reading comprehension learners' perceptions about the impact of the bilingual approach versus the monolingual one on their ability to pass exams and get high marks?

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to provide an in-depth report of the effects that the bilingual approach has on female Saudi EFL beginners' academic achievement—their Level 1 reading comprehension and classroom interaction and involvement. The researcher used pre-intervention and post-intervention reading comprehension tests to investigate the impact of the bilingual approach. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observation were also employed to delve deeper into the participants' perceptions of the effects the bilingual approach had on their performance and classroom involvement. This triangulation method was considered fundamental for evaluating the effectiveness of the bilingual approach. The following sections detail the study's methodology.

4.1. Participants:

The study employed data obtained from 50 female Saudi Level 1 EFL students in the English Department Program (female campus) during the first semester of the 2019–2020 academic year. This program offers a bachelor's degree in the English language. The participants' ages were between 18 and 20 years. As Level 1 learners, they studied listening, speaking, reading, and writing English language skills. Level 1 learners were chosen for this research because they are novices, and their English comprehension is not high. During data collection, the participants were studying Level 1 reading comprehension, the content of which was found in *Well Read 1 Student Book: Skills and Strategies for Reading Student Guide* by Pasternak and Wrangell (2007). The participants were from two classes taught by the same teacher. To test the bilingual strategy's effects, the participants (52 total) took pre- and post-intervention tests. First, they took the pre-test. After four weeks, they took the post-test. One student from each group, however, did not come for the post-test. So, the final number of participants totaled 50. These students were divided into the experimental and control groups with 25 students in each group (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic information on experiment participants

Group	N	Level	Teaching Strategy	Age
Experimental	25	Beginners	Bilingualism	18—20
Control	25	Beginners	Monolingualism	18—20

4.2. Materials:

The researcher employed three main data collection instruments. The first one was reading comprehension tests to collect data related to the bilingual approach's impact on the participants' academic performance (see Appendix A). An assistant professor specialized in the field reviewed the test. It was also based on the given class materials and thus thought to be suitable for the level of the participants. The second instrument was a four-week (12 lecture) classroom observation of the experimental and control groups to obtain data concerning the influence of the bilingual approach on classroom interaction and student involvement. The observation checklist depended on two dynamic indicators: student–teacher interaction and students' comprehension of the given lesson (see Appendix B). In addition to the reading comprehension tests and the classroom observation, interviews were conducted with six participants (three from each class) in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their views on how and why the bilingual approach impacted their ability to pass exams and earn high marks in the course (see Appendix C).

 To complete the data analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program, version 23, was used to conduct an inferential statistics comparison test (paired t-test), to conduct an independent samples t-test and compare the means of the two groups (bilingual and monolingual) from the reading comprehension academic performance tests. To analyze the qualitative data gained from the observation and interviews, the researcher used manual thematic content analysis.

4.3. Procedures:

 The researcher divided the fifty participants into two groups: control and experimental. Then, both groups were pre-tested. One teacher was responsible for both classes, teaching the experimental group via the bilingual strategy and the control group via the monolingual strategy. The research conducted a four-week (three lectures per week) observation of the groups. Then, the researcher administered a post-test to both groups. In the same context, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants (three from each group) to gain an in-depth account of the students' perceptions of bilingualism's impact on their academic performance. Each interview lasted between five and ten minutes. All interviews were conducted during one period for each class on the same day to avoid any classroom environment change or any preparation of

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answers based on the discussion with other students who already knew the interview questions.

For data analysis, the researcher used the SPSS program to conduct an independent samples t-test to compare the bilingual and monolingual groups' mean scores in their pre- and post-tests. The aim was to measure the effect of bilingual instruction strategies on the participants' reading comprehension academic performance. Afterward, a thematic content analysis was applied to the observation and interviews. The researcher manually wrote and summarized the elicited main themes based on the observation sheets and the two interview questions. The different views in the interview responses were recorded to calculate the percentages.

5. Results

5.1. Independent Samples T-Test Results:

Independent sample t-tests were used to compare the bilingual group (Group A) and the monolingual group (Group B) to determine whether they had significantly different mean scores on the pre- and post-tests. Eta squared ($\eta2$) was used to determine the size effect between the independent groups. The results are presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Independent Samples T-Test Results for Groups A and B

Test	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df (N1+N2-2)	P-value	η^2
Pre-Test	Group A	25	13.48	3.38	0.175	48	0.862	0.0006
	Group B	25	13.32	3.06				
Post-Test	Group A	25	16.28	2.79	2.359	48	0.022*	0.104
	Group B	25	14.40	2.84				

*: Significant at level 0.05

As shown in Table 2, while there was no statistically significant difference between Groups A and B for the pre-test (p>0.05), there was a significant statistical difference between these groups in the post-test, favoring the bilingual group: (p<0.05) with a medium effect size (0.06) and η^2 (0.104). This result means that the bilingual teaching strategy was more effective than the monolingual one for teaching the reading comprehension course to female Saudi EFL beginners.

5.2. Classroom Observation:

The classroom observation determined that there was a difference between the bilingual and monolingual groups' classroom interaction and involvement. The four-week observation of the two classes' dynamics showed that the levels of involvement and student attentiveness differed. Most students in the bilingual class engaged with the lessons, and the number of students participating in each lesson was high compared to the monolingual class.

When the teacher gave the class instructions in both L1 and the TL, more students were active than when given instructions only in the TL. The different levels of activity for the group that was instructed solely in the TL were caused by their understanding levels, as it took them some time to comprehend what they received. In the bilingual group, when the teacher asked a comprehension question or asked about the meaning of an unfamiliar word, most students felt comfortable giving L1 (Arabic) synonyms. However, in the other class, instructed only in the TL, the number of students who participated during lectures and were willing to answer questions in the target language was significantly lower.

The researcher also noted that the bilingual strategy encouraged learners to ask more questions than monolingual instruction. Students in the monolingual class posed fewer questions because they felt they were obligated to construct any question in the TL. The four-week classroom observations indicated that the bilingual

approach was more effective than the monolingual one, giving language learners a space to understand, comprehend, and ask questions about the content.

5.3. Interviews:

Six students from both groups were interviewed (three from each class). Two main questions were asked of all the interviewees: 1) whether bilingualism in class would increase their chances of passing their exams, and 2) whether their teacher's bilingualism, using Arabic in class, would help them earn high marks. The interviewees were also asked to give reasons for their answers. From these interviews, the researcher found that the vast majority of participants (80%) believed the bilingual approach increased their chances of passing their exams. In comparison, only a few (20%) believed that using just the TL (English) in class increased their chances of passing their exams. The vast majority of participants (81%) also believed that bilingualism in class helped them earn high marks, while only a few (19%) believed that using just the TL (English) helped them earn high marks. The students who favored the bilingual approach said they did so because they were beginners, and bilingualism helped them understand the course properly. It helped them grasp unfamiliar vocabulary, and they were able to remember the words during exams. The participants who disagreed with the bilingual approach said that monolingualism gave them an excellent opportunity to learn the TL. Interestingly, the researcher noticed that some of the interviewees with the monolingual approach had attended training courses about the target language before joining the college and benefited from them. Their fluency was evident during the interviews.

To conclude, the results of the paired samples showed that the bilingual approach, as a teaching strategy, positively affected the academic achievement of Level 1 reading comprehension of female Saudi EFL learners. The results of the analysis of classroom observation revealed that this approach also had a positive impact on classroom interaction and student involvement. Moreover, the responses to the two interview questions showed that most of the participants saw the bilingual approach as helpful in passing reading exams and getting high marks.

6. Discussion

6.1. Effect of Bilingualism on Students' Academic Achievement:

The above findings show that the bilingual approach to teaching reading comprehension among female Saudi EFL beginners is useful for their academic performance and classroom interaction and involvement. They also illustrate that most of the learners held positive views about this approach's effect on their exam results. The results related to the effectiveness of the bilingual approach on learners' academic performance is not in line with the research of Mahmoud (2012), Naka (2014), or Almansour (2016). This lack of consistency might be because those previous studies did not focus on reading comprehension skills but, instead, on grammar, speaking, or all language skills taken together. The fact that Turnbull and Evans (2017) reported bilingualism as positively impacting reading comprehension skills supports this explanation.

Most previous studies indicate that EFL learners generally have positive attitudes toward translanguaging between their L1s and TLs in class (Enama, 2016; Bozorgian & Luo, 2018; Orhan & Aslan, 2018). These findings align with this study's results, stating that most EFL learners hold positive perceptions about the usefulness of the bilingual approach in passing exams and earning high marks. The present research also supports Alshammari's (2011) conclusion that

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EFL beginners in college believe the bilingual approach helps them understand new vocabulary and difficult concepts. This study also supports the findings of Van Dulm (2007), Modupeola (2013), and Shahnaz (2015), which have confirmed the usefulness of the bilingual approach in accelerating the language learning process for beginners.

6.2. Bilingualism and Student's Classroom Interaction and Involvement:

Regarding the impact of the bilingual approach on the female Saudi EFL learners' classroom interaction and involvement, this study determined that the approach affects them positively. This finding is reminiscent of Narayan's conclusion (2019), who states that that EFL classrooms' bilingual approach increases interaction between the students and teacher. It is also in line with the most recent conclusion by Aoyama (2020), which indicates that this approach facilitates communication between EFL learners and their teachers. Without understanding the content or instructions, language learners will never be able to interact with their teachers, which will lead to negative classroom atmospheres in which students might feel anxious and thus stop communicating with their teachers.

7. Conclusion

As seen in the preceding sections, the present findings offer evidence for the positive effects of using bilingualism as a teaching strategy for female Saudi EFL beginners' academic performance in a reading comprehension course. EFL learners see bilingualism as a tool for increasing their chances of passing their exams and earning high marks. In the present case, most students in the bilingual class were involved in the lessons. The number of students actively participating was high compared to the monolingual, TL-only class. Student–teacher interaction also increased, along with students' classroom involvement/participation when the teacher applied the bilingual approach.

8. Implications and Recommendations

The aforementioned findings have practical implications for teaching reading comprehension to EFL beginners. For instance, EFL teachers might employ the bilingual approach, depending on their students' proficiency levels, to make the input more comprehensible, create a more positive learning environment, encourage them to interact in the classroom, and help them successfully learn. It is also recommended that EFL teachers know their students' bilingualism needs and use the appropriate approach. EFL beginners need some amount of bilingual instruction to make the input they receive more comprehensible, so they can benefit from it to accelerate the learning process. Bilingualism can enhance EFL beginners' overall classroom interaction with the teacher and involvement with the learning environment, which will help them learn better.

As implications for future studies, researchers could investigate bilingualism's impact as an instructional strategy for teaching listening, writing, and speaking skills to Saudi EFL beginners. They could also investigate the impact of the monolingual versus bilingual approaches on different levels of EFL beginners to give a complete picture of these approaches' effectiveness on beginners' performance. Future research could also focus on the impact of classroom bilingualism on the classroom learning environment. Another related and recommended investigation would be to explore EFL learners' attitudes towards being taught by bilingual or monolingual teachers at beginner levels.

Bios

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