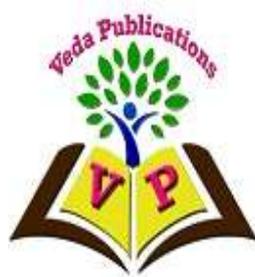**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

TEACHING ENGLISH IN ESL AND EFL CONTEXTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN SYRIAN AND INDIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English language has become a priority for educational bodies around the world, especially in developing countries where the aspiration to go global increases drastically. Whether in a small country like Syria, where English is regarded as a foreign language, or in a sub-continent like India, where English is a second associate language, teaching English in schools is gaining more attention.

Tracing insights from their teaching experience and exposure to the educational milieu in both countries, the researchers conducted a comparative approach to examine the major traits of teaching English language in public schools in both countries. Data analysis reveals that the teaching practices are almost the same in the ESL and the EFL contexts, where teacher-cantered classrooms, exam-oriented activities and traditional teaching methods are dominant. The results of this study validate questioning the boundaries established in English Language Teaching literature between teaching English in EFL versus ESL contexts. It is found that such differentiations are not solid as the educational policies in both contexts isolate language teaching and learning in the classroom from language use in the target community.

Keywords*: EFL, ESL, Language Teaching, Classroom Practices, Syria, India.*

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of English as a Lingua Franca (LF), demands for learning it increased, and many governments directed their efforts to establish sustainable environments for teaching and learning English at different levels. According to Wiley (1996), planning language cannot be done in isolation from socio-political issues in any community. Schools play a role in promoting languages in accordance with the policies determined by the state. In monolingual countries like Syria, English is one of the foreign languages taught at schools and universities beside French, Russian and German. Though English is widely chosen by students at different levels, it is not recognizably used in the social context. India, on the other hand, is another case where English enjoys the status of an associate official language. The extensive use and the constitutional appeal of English in India makes one label it as a second language. Given the different status of English in India and Syria, it can be used to compare between teaching English in second and foreign language contexts. This study is an attempt to establish this comparison and identify the differences and similarities in teaching English existing in both settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language educators generally tend to adopt a clear-cut distinction between EFL and ESL. Thus, English is defined as a second language when it is learned for "normal day-to-day social interaction" (Wilkins 1974), and a foreign language when its use is restricted to the classroom. As presented by (Broughton et al. 1987), when English is a second language it is the language for mass media, education, administrative and official institutions, like law courts, and commercial and industrial organizations. On the other hand, English is a foreign language in countries where it is only taught in schools, yet not used socially.

It is believed that learning English is faster and easier in a second language context. This belief is supported by many researchers (Carroll 1967; Ellis 1986; Freed 1990 and Long 1996) who suggest that the learners' being in a second language context gives him superiority to that in a foreign context. One argument is that the learner's exposure to the target language is higher and the chances of receiving comprehensive input is larger when in a second language setting. In other words, if the learners have contact with other L2 speakers, their acquisition process of that language is enhanced. Spada (1986) suggests that conversational interaction is a main source of linguistic input that facilitates L2 acquisition. Long's interactive hypothesis (Long 1996) also states that acquiring a second language happens through negotiating meaning in actual interactions rather than only learning. This meaningful interaction mentioned by Spada (1986) and Long (1996) can only be achieved when the learner is in a second language setting. Having the previous understanding of second language acquisition in mind, it can be inferred also that the foreign language context provides lesser opportunities for learners and has a negative impact on their learning process. Wilkins (1974) states that the distinction between EFL and ESL is rather conceptual, yet the second language learners have more advantage since they are obliged to use the target language while still in the process of learning. Stern (1983) suggests that using the conceptual distinction of English as a foreign and a second language has to be done carefully since these terms can be sometimes misleading. Stern argues that although learning a second language is rather 'picked up' due to environmental support, that is absent in the case of a foreign language, the characteristics are not valid for creating neat labels such as EFL and ESL.

BACKGROUND

Even before the independence, English has always enjoyed a respectable status in India, though it was stigmatized as being the language of the colonizer. Statistics show that India is the third largest English speaking country after the US and the UK. After India gained its independence in 1947, the language issue was one of the major topics to discuss before writing the constitution. The new constitution asserted the pluralistic identity of India both linguistically and culturally. Hence, Article 343 of the Indian Constitution designates Hindi as the official language of the union, while English is to be used for all official union purposes for a period of 15 years. After 9 years of that date, the Official Language Commission of India suggested extending the use of English to become an "associate official language" or an "associate additional language." Thus, language

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planning in India had the identity of being status-based rather than acquisition-based. The post-independence period witnessed the establishment of several institutes to train English teachers, and the language became a compulsory subject in the curriculum of Indian schools at different levels. English also became the medium of instruction and examination in the university and postgraduate levels. English shifted its status from a foreign to a second language after the Independence, and proficiency became a major demand to get better job opportunities. Nowadays, nearly 35 million Indians speak and write English (Vijayalakshmi and Babu 2014).

The raise of English as an important foriegn langugue in Syria started after WWII, especially after the Syrian- Egyptian Union in 1958 till 1961. Starting from the 1990s onwords, teaching English has been under growing infulence of the new techological, educational and social advancements in the country. Improving currecula in a sense was based on the new trends of teaching. Before 1992, English was taught using textbooks with tradtional methods (basically the Grammar Translation Method.) Moving up to the year 2000, new textbooks were written, but the same old methods were used. A radical change took place between 2000 and 2010 where the communicative approach was used along with new textbooks written by British authers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The present study is designed with the following objectives in mind:

1. To investigate the predominant classroom activities that can be identified in EFL and ESL contexts: Syria and India as examples.

2. To present a systematic comparison between the two contexts in relation to a predetermined set of categories.

2. To examine the strength of the boundaries established to differentiate between teaching English in ESL and EFL contexts.

METHODOLOGY

As identifying classroom practices in the selected settings was the aim of this research, systematic observation of genuine classes was adopted as the data collection tool. The Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching

(COLT) (Allen et al. 1983 and Allen et al. 1985) was the scheme selected as it was originally designed to help the researcher compare between different classrooms and describe what is happening in the most precise way (Nunan 1992). The COLT scheme is consisted of two parts; A and B. According to Fröhlich, Spada, and Allen (1985), Part A contains categories related to the pedagogy in communicative language teaching literature, while Part B contains issues that are derived from research on first and second language acquisition. In other words, part A is to explain what is happening in the classroom in terms of the activities taking place, whereas part B is of the verbal acts that take place within these activities. All sessions were audio-recorded and initial coding took place while in the classes.

SAMPLE

The population selected for this study was conducted between March and July 2017 in three different classes randomly selected in one public school in each country, with three visits for each class. In India, the classes were Class 7, Class 8 and Class 9 in the Girls Government School in Tezpur, Assam. This school is one of two government schools in Tezpur town, Assam, India. The number of students in each class is between 50 to 60 students. Each period is of 40 minutes. Students speak Assamese as their first language. While in Syria, the classes observed were Class 8, Class 11 and Class 12 in Ain-Ftaima Public School in Bremanet Al-Mashayekh, Tartous. The number of students observed in each class is between 20 to 30 students. Students speak Arabic as their first language. The classes selected in both countries were in the intermediate and high school levels.

DATA ANALYSIS

For the research questions addressed, the researcher followed the analysis model presented in (Allen et al. 1983) and (Allen et al. 1985) in transcription, coding and the general layout of results. The research questions were approached by selecting particular major parts for analysis since it is of no substantial benefit to consider all parts of both A and B. Thus, "participant organization", "language", and "student modality" were selected from Part A, and "use of target language" was only selected in Part B. As instructed by the scheme's developers, the

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coding process of Part A took place in the classroom, while Part B was coded by listening to the recordings of the sessions. The calculation of percentages of each major part in both parts A and B was done following the calculation model presented in (Allen et al. 1985).

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

Coding the data obtained revealed a set of recurring classroom activities in both settings. These activities were classified to fit under generalized categories that serve the one goal of this study; namely stating the predominant activities used in the teaching process. For example, different subtypes of drills including repetition drills, question-and-answer drills, chain drills, and transformation drills were all jotted under the general category 'Drill'. The general category 'Grammar' also refers to all grammar-related activities, such as explaining grammatical rules, giving examples of certain grammatical points, and solving exercises related to clarifying grammatical differences.

In the classes observed in India, translation of texts, exercises and grammatical rules dominated the scene. 27.66 % of a period was dedicated to drills, and 14.58 % for casual conversations including greetings, explaining activities, maintain discipline in the class, and giving instructions for tests. 14.75 % of each period was for reading either by teachers or students, and 6.75 % was for explaining grammatical rules. The least percentage was for silent reading with 4.36 % of a period. For answering reading comprehension questions, the teacher chose to dictate the answers to students and asked them to memorize them for the test.

The Syrian class was dominated by solving drills (36.29 %) because teachers tried to engage students as much as possible with an activity that will require all of them to work individually or in small groups. The data also shows that translation and reading have relatively the same share of occurrence with 19.62 % for the former and 17.40 % for the latter. Reading a text is usually done sentence by sentence with the teacher and the students translating lists of vocabularies and sentences. Finally, grammar and casual conversation had 16.28% and 9.22 % respectively.

Figure 1: Activity Type

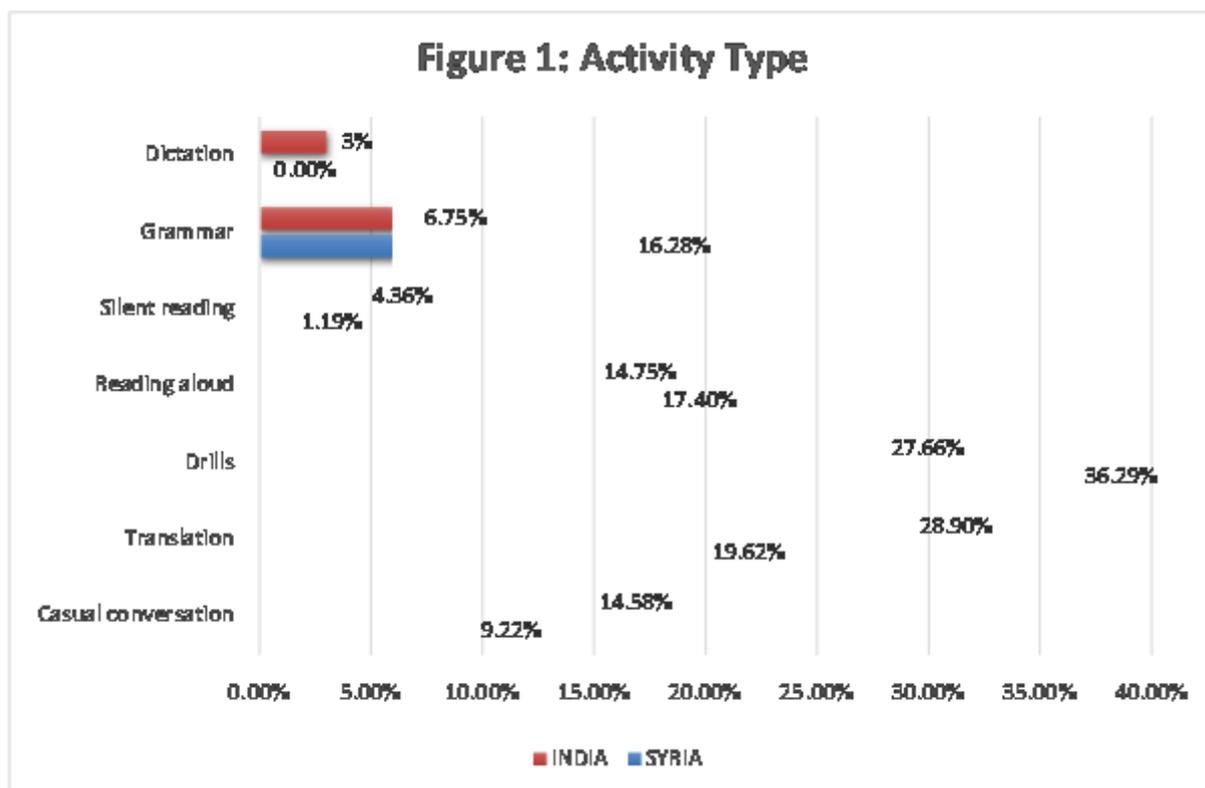Mai Mohamad[1*], Madan M. Sarma[2], Debasish Mohapatra[3]

Figure 2 presents the mean percentages of whole class participant organization in both samples. The data reveals that the dominant feature of whole class interaction in both settings is that of teachers talking to or addressing students; either as individuals or as a group (66.35 % in Syria and 66.74 % in India). In addition to that, the amounts of interaction either between students themselves, or in their choral-like behaviour are relatively the same in both ESL and EFL classes. In the Syrian classroom 17.94 % is of students interacting with each other, and 15.71 % of interaction is of students behaving as one group. In the Indian case a percentage of 14.40 is of students talking to each other and 18.88 % is for students giving choral-like responses.
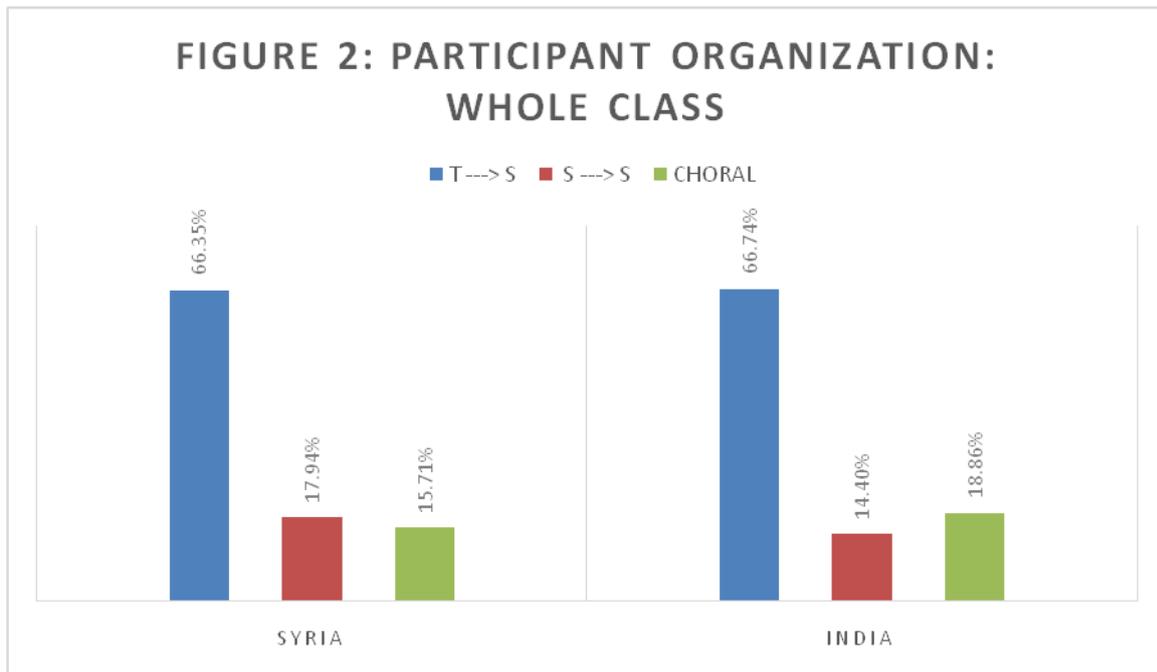
Participant organization is also investigated by checking the mean percentages of individual and group work. While in the Syrian case the teacher manipulated some activities, like answering comprehension questions of a written text or drills on certain grammatical rules, to engage students (either as pairs or small groups) in group work (21.05 % for group work and 78.95 % for individual work), it was rarely the case in the Indian sample. In the latter case, teachers were more interested in asking individual students as part of their strategy to capture students' attention through motivating them extrinsically to give correct responses when asked. In the Indian classroom, only 2 % was for students share the same activity, and 98 % for individual answers). Figure 3 illustrates these findings and shows clearly that individual work is of very high recurrences in both samples.

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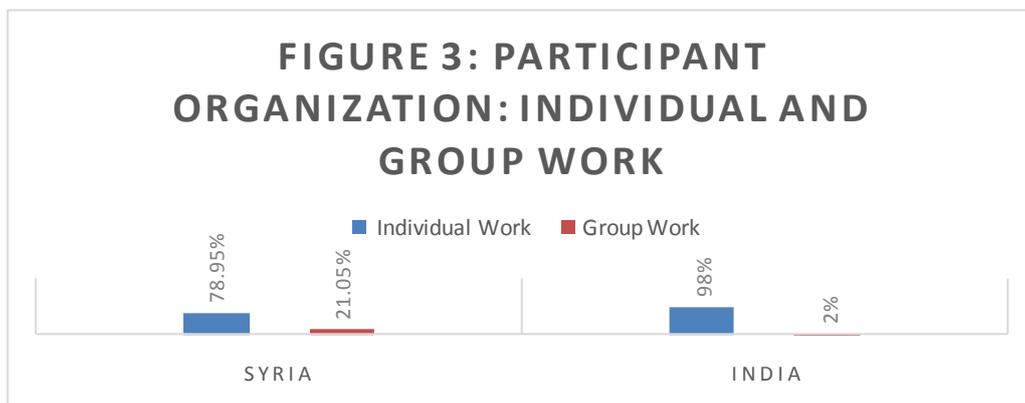
Another major category for investigation was "the Content" of the activities and the subject matter of all that was read, written, listened to or being talked about (Allen et al. 1985) in the sessions observed. In this section, two sub-categories were checked; namely language and topic control. In Table 1, the resulting percentages show that form had been the dominant focus in both the Syrian and the Indian cases, with 64.99 % and 61.83 % respectively. It was noticed that teachers intended to choose activities with the central focus on explaining grammatical rules, building vocabulary lists and correcting pronunciation. The distribution of these moves varied between Syrian and Indian classes, where grammar and grammar-related issues were extensively addressed in the former and vocabulary and translation in the later. In addition to that, Table 1 shows that language function and language sociolinguistics were of less occurrences in both samples. The Indian sample, however, included more practices of 'illocutionary acts', such as making requests or explanations. Indian classes involved students more in practices that reflect the sociolinguistic use of language like discussing the type of language used in writing personal biography in one of the lessons on the Indian president Abdulkalam.

Table 1

Content: Language

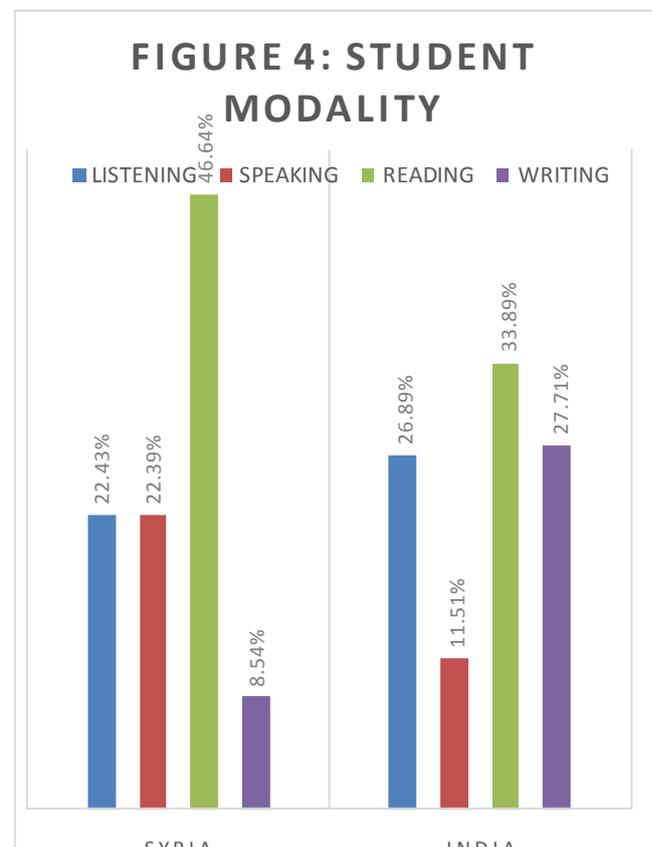|	Form	Function	Sociolinguistics
SYRIA	75.99 %	18.40 %	5.61 %
INDIA	61.83 %	21.67 %	16.50 %

In Table 2, another similarity between the Syrian and the Indian environments is being found, where the teacher has relatively the supreme authority in selecting and implementing tasks, activities, materials and topics. More than two thirds (78.30 % in Syria and 80.95 % in India) of what is to be learned is approved by the teacher. Students, however, determine what is to be discussed via a limited range of questions and requests, such as asking to translate vocabularies or explaining a grammatical point, or raising issues related to tests or giving opinion of what they want to exercise in a particular section of the textbook. The table also shows that the Syrian

classroom witnesses more collaboration between the teacher and the student in deciding on topics (10.55 %), though it is still minimal in both samples when compared to the role of the teacher alone.

Table 2

Content: Topic Control

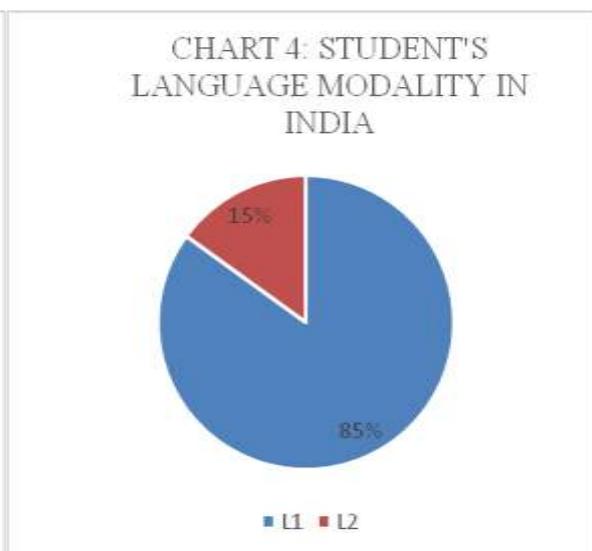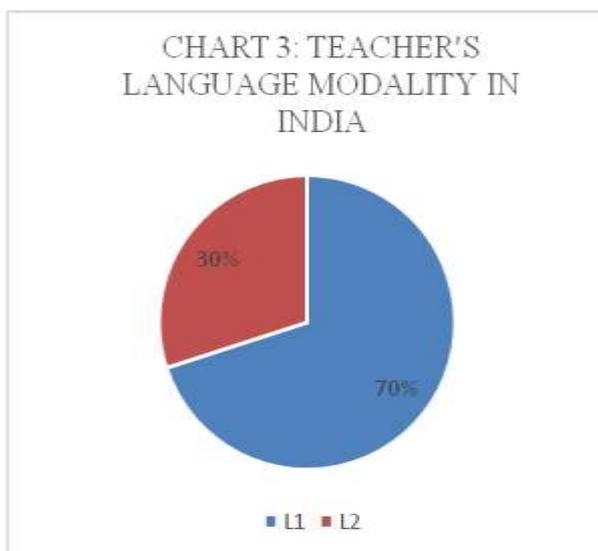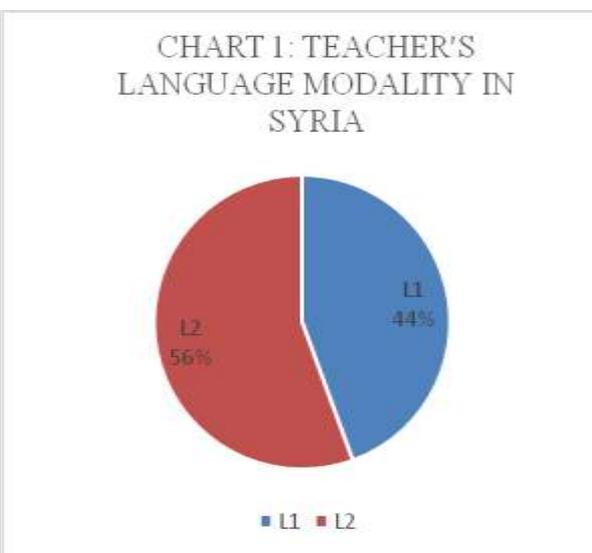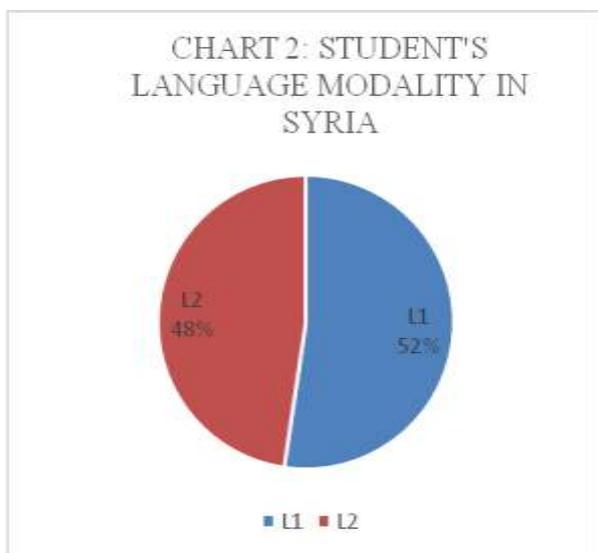|	Teacher	Teacher & Student	Student
SYRIA	78.30 %	10.55 %	11.15 %
INDIA	80.95 %	5.09 %	13.96 %

The four skills and the extent to which they occur in the classrooms observed are investigated in a separate category called "Student Modality" that is illustrated in Figure 4. It is worth mentioning here that information was collected on the basis of what skill is being dealt with, not how much teachers and students know about this skill. In this part of data, there appeared variations in between the two countries. In the Syrian case, reading was the skill mainly practiced with 46.64 %, while writing was the least with 8.54 %. This fluctuation is not this much apparent in the Indian case, where the four skills nearly enjoy the same amount of interest. Indian students, however, speak less than they read, write or listen.

FIGURE 4: STUDENT MODALITY

LISTENING ■ SPEAKING ■ READING ■ WRITING

SYRIA: 22.43% 22.39% 46.64% 8.54%
INDIA: 26.89% 11.51% 33.89% 27.71%

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The last category to question was students and teachers "verbal interaction", in particular, what language(s) do teachers and students use in the classroom. This category is listed under Part B of COLT. In this section, the data is organized into two sets; one for students and one for teachers. In charts 1 and 2, it can be noted that teachers in the Syrian classroom use the target language more than their first language and more than their students do. It was observed that the use of the two languages is relatively equal, especially if we discount the events when teachers and students tend to use Arabic to

discuss examinations, drop jokes and motivation-related talks done primarily by the teacher and some students. The picture is totally different in the Indian classroom, where both students and teachers use English much less than their local language. Assamese is heavily used to explain texts (not only translate, but also clarify events and concepts), give instructions, and answer questions (even if these were asked in L2 as follow up questions for a reading text). In charts 3 and 4, the shares for using the two languages in the Indian context are shown.

CHART 2: STUDENT'S LANGUAGE MODALITY IN SYRIA — L1 52%, L2 48%

CHART 1: TEACHER'S LANGUAGE MODALITY IN SYRIA — L1 44%, L2 56%

CHART 3: TEACHER'S LANGUAGE MODALITY IN INDIA — L1 70%, L2 30%

CHART 4: STUDENT'S LANGUAGE MODALITY IN INDIA — L1 85%, L2 15%

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DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The above-mentioned results about classroom activities, organization of teachers and students and the different roles they take, language skills, and language(s) modality and use all allow for setting up a comparison between ESL and EFL contexts. First, the two contexts share the same set of activities with clear focus on drills and translation. The Indian Ministry of Education states clearly that the English as a second language curriculum has the goals of attaining basic proficiency and developing the students' ability to use language for social and educational purposes. On the other hand, the Syrian Ministry of Education introduced the new curriculum of English to build the students' communicative ability to use a foreign language. The results attained show that the types of activities practiced in the classroom are not enough to achieve the goals set by the two ministries. In other words, the teacher in both settings is more interested in delivering the material for exam ends. Washback is a predominant feature in both contexts, hence the extensive focus on drills that are memorized for tests. Translation is also employed to help students memorize grammatical rules. Even full-sentence answers of comprehension questions are translated into Assamese. According to Howatt (1984), in the GT classroom, the teacher will provide the student with a long list of bilingual vocabulary that he has to memorize, then a punch of sentences to translate and elicit grammatical rules which are memorized in turn. Through comparing the activities practiced in the EFL and the ESL contexts, it can be seen that both are following the Grammar Translation ideology.

Second, the results reflect a teacher-centred classroom environment in both EFL and ESL contexts. The teacher has the supreme authority in deciding what to do and how to do every activity. As a result, the teacher takes the major part of classroom talk as he/she directs students as individuals and groups. A one-sided environment does not allow for communicative practice of the language. In addition, the huge number of students, and the time limitations force teachers to minimize group work. The teacher-centeredness can be understood better when examining the status of English in public school's curricula. In both contexts, English language

is a subject. This fact legitimates the teachers' efforts to teach what is necessary for students to pass the subject's examination at the end of the year. Hence, English is not considered for use outside the classroom, though it is expected to encounter people who speak it for daily needs in the ESL context. In fact, the striking result comes from the finding that speaking is the least practiced skill in the ESL classroom. In addition to that, comparing the use of English inside the classroom shows that the ESL setting again is way behind the EFL setting. Researchers like (Cook 2008; Franklin 1990; and Macaro 1997) state that using L1 can be helpful for teachers when giving instructions or feedback, organizing the classroom, or even explaining complex grammatical rules. Swain and Lapkin (2000) also argue that L1 is "an important cognitive tool." Yet, all of these arguments are for an EFL context. In the ESL context, where L2 input is greater, it is expected that L2 use is maximal. The results, however, show the opposite.

Finally, the discussion above validates questioning the strength of the definitions given to differentiate between teaching in ESL and EFL contexts. The level of similarity between the two teaching environments supports Stern's (1983) argument that labels are not true indicators of status. In other words, even if the two settings studied are presented by the Indian and the Syrian national states as being affiliated with two different contexts, the educational practices are relatively the same in both. This leads us to infer that teaching English is not always affected by its existence as a language of use in society. The educational system creates an independent atmosphere that isolates teachers and students from the surrounding linguistic community. The language policy determined by the state does not always affect teaching English in schools, which takes place in a bubble-like-environment away from external or social language use. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) argue that the educator's categorization of a particular language as foreign affects the teaching methodology used to teach it in the classroom. The results of this research, however, show that the educational ideology itself has the upper hand over classroom events and language status. (Broughton et al. 1987) suggest that due to the "decreasing role of

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English" in India, the status of English is being shifted to a foreign language and is taught as such. First and foremost, it is not accurate to say that the role of English in modern India is decreasing thus a change of status is occurring. Second, if one breaks free from the trap of labels, the full picture of English language education will be further clarified. The present research shows that the public educational atmosphere (with more students enrolled in schools, graduation pressure on students, and students' dependence on other sources for learning language in the private sector) forces-in teaching practices similar to these taking place in countries like Syria where English is not used for communicative purposes outside the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Classrooms are complex and dynamic social settings with familiar and routine-like- processes (Burns 1991), which means that an authentic study can be arrived at only if one approaches this setting as it is on the ground. The present study adopted this assumption, yet several limitations were in the way. The first limitation is the sample size, where data collection took place in schools in one governorate in Syria, and one state in India. Future studies may widen the sample to include schools in different states and at different levels. Secondly, the study only included public schools in both settings. A substantial difference in the teaching environment is there between private and public schools in Syria, and Assamese and English-medium schools in Assam, India. Considering non-government schools may present additional data that can support the research's quest.

This study has been an attempt to compare two contexts in order to arrive at solid results that can be used for the critique of certain concepts in ELT. It has been found that relatively the same teaching method (the Grammar Translation Method) is being used to teach English language in two settings labelled as EFL and ESL. The similarity found in the teaching environment triggers the suggestion that the educational system in both settings is the reason for isolating English in the classroom from language use outside it. These findings lead one to suggest that the educational bodies in each country may need to re-investigate the curricula designed on

the basis of their being taught using teaching methods such as the Communicative Approach or the Task-based and Learner-cantered approaches. These bodies may also consider investigating the actual status and use of English in the community aside from the official labels determined by the national state. Future studies may be interested also in investigating the reasons for the persistence of using traditional methods even today, particularly in developing countries, and how much courage does one need to approve these methods' strength over what is recently promoted as the perfect method.

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