

A LITERATURE REVIEW ON USING THE FIRST LANGUAGE IN A SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to review on the use of a first language or a mother tongue (L1) in a second or foreign language (L2) classroom. The report examines permissible frequencies, practical purposes and influential factors of the L1 employment in the L2 classrooms. The findings provide that (i) there are mixed results of L1 use among novice and experienced teachers or low-level and high-level students and among different language teaching approaches followed by (ii) three main categorized reasons facilitating the role of L1. The review further suggests strong factors influencing the use of L1, namely task types, proficiency levels, teaching experience, timetabling, pedagogical tools, learning strategies, teachers' beliefs and learners' perceptions. The review closes with conclusion and classroom implications.

Keywords: *first language (L1), second/foreign language (L2), the use of L1.*

1. Introduction

Employing the first language (L1) in a second language (L2) classroom has recently sparked off considerable debate (Klapper, 2006) and proposed opposing positions (White & Storch, 2012) in L2 language learning and teaching. On the one hand, the L2 learning is actively facilitated by the use of L1 (Levine, 2003; Jingxia, 2010) and (2) L2 teaching-and-learning process is positively influenced (Iqbal, 2011). Additionally, (3) students' communication problems can be handled significantly by employing the L1 in a L2 classroom (Moghadam, Samad, & Shahraki, 2012; Jamshidi & Navehebrahim, 2013). Besides, Cenoz & Gorter (2011) assert that students' sense of identity can be strongly fostered by utilizing the mother tongue since the native language is inevitably the "language of thought" (Macaro, 2005, p. 68). Indeed, the dominated viewpoints of anti-L1

attitudes for several decades have been challenged by recent attention to the role of L1 and of normal process of multilingual functioning (Scott & Fuente, 2008). Generally, the use of L1 is advocated in light of some facilitative roles in the process of the second language learning and teaching and of inevitable occurrence among the language teachers who share the same L1 with the learners.

On the other hand, (i) L1 interferences should be avoided in an L2 classroom by advocating a policy of the only-and-sole target language use so that a pure target language exposure can be available to learners (Lightbown, 2001; Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 1984). In the same vein, Lee (2013) and MacDonald (1993) echoes that (ii) students' deprivation to opportunities of receiving and producing the target language can be caused by not supporting the only L2 policy.

Additionally, Nation (2003) cautions that (iii) students' motivation can be reduced if overusing the L1, and L2 should be maximized as much as possible in a classroom. Furthermore, Ellis (2008) warns that (iv) the overuse of the L1 should be admonished because students have a classroom context as their only place to be immersed in the L2. In general, the L2-only policy has strongly been promoted on account of the valuable opportunities of pure L2 exposure and students' motivation enhancement.

Currently, English is regarded as an official foreign language in Vietnam and is supposed to be fully used and instructed in all EFL classrooms although none of official documents are released to regulate the frequency of Vietnamese use in the EFL classrooms. As a consequence, the rationale of employing L1 in EFL classrooms mainly relies on teachers' beliefs and practices. Personally, as a teacher of English language, I sometimes feel guilty that the use of Vietnamese (L1) makes students lack of the English language (L2) exposure. Even more, they seem to undervalue the opportunities of using the L2 when required because of the habit of overusing the L1. For some other times, the use of L1 can save my times of instructions for other classroom activities because of our few weekly classroom meetings. Besides, while L2-only policy is given in my classroom, it gives my students a burden on communicating and intermingling in complex activities and understanding clearly what they are required to do. This investigation practically sheds light on my understanding about some advantages and disadvantages of using the L1 in my EFL classrooms.

The paper consequently and subsequently seeks to review on the frequencies, purposes, and influential factors for employing the L1 in an L2 classroom. In

doing so, the review begins with the frequencies of L1 utilization in which mixed findings and different approaches with different L1 use frequencies are mainly presented. Next, the three main categories of purposes of L1 utilization are illustrated before influential factors including teachers and learners' beliefs are provided. The reasons for monolingual approach advocating the L2-only policy will be reported then. The review closes with classroom implications and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Frequencies of L1 Use

The findings from various studies related to the frequency of L1 use are quite mixed. For instance, Macaro (2001) and Guthrie (1987) show a low level (under 20 per cent) of teachers' first language use during class time while Edstrom (2006), Kim & Elder (2005), Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie (2002) and Duff & Polio (1990) highlight great variations among teachers' use of the first language (from 10 to 100 per cent). Additionally, Crawford (2004)'s study shows that teachers' L1 use gradually decreases from low level of L2 competence to intermediate-or-upper levels. In other words, the utilization of L1 by the teachers in beginner-level classes is higher than that of L1 use in intermediate-or-upper-level classes. In the same vein, experienced teachers report a lesser proportion of L1 use in comparison with novice teachers do (Kraemer, 2006). Generally, Campa & Nassaji (2009) reveal the frequency use of L1 varies among teaching contexts while White & Storch (2012) explain different analysis methods of teacher talk (e.g., word count, turn count, or both) significantly lead to mixed findings.

Regarding the L1 use by students in a classroom, in a study of Yan, Fung, Liu, & Huang (2015) investigating the context of target English language (L2) use of Chinese students, the results show that the frequency

of students' L1 use significantly increases from junior high school students to senior ones because there are more emphasis on preparing students for national university entrance examination. However, in another study examining frequency of L1 use in students' interaction by Swain & Lapkin (2000), the higher L1-use frequency of lower proficiency students is reported. In contrast to Swain & Lapkin (2000), Storch & Aldosari (2010) investigate the L1 utilization by 15 pairs of college students with different combinations of proficiency levels. A finding shows a low frequency of L1 use (under 20 per cent) in which the L1 frequency use is not influenced by proficiency levels but by students' beliefs for an opportunity for the practice of the target language.

Besides, different approaches of language teaching and learning cause different frequency of L1 use (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Richards & Rodgers (2001), some approaches fully promote the use of L1 while others partially allow or completely forbid the L1 utilization. Regarding the full allowance of L1 employment, Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) comes first on the list. More specifically, GMT fully approves the use of L1 in which reading literacy through translation exercises and deductive grammar rules are focused. Second, Community Language Learning (CLL) is another one promoting the full employment of the L1. CLL strongly relies on the language interpretive equivalents between the two languages. Students learn the L2 through a flow of L2 messages and its parallel meaning of a flow of L1 messages.

In contrast, Natural Approach (NA), Total Physical Response (TPR), Direct Method (DM), and Audiolingualism (ALM) ban the use of L1 in the classroom outright. These approaches confirm that (1) the target language should be instructed and used

exclusively in the classroom and (2) overt L1 use for grammatical instruction should be deemphasized.

Besides, some other approaches partially allow the use of L1 such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content Based Instruction (CBI), Cooperative Learning (CL), Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Suggestopedia, etc. These approaches take a neutral/ or no stance on employing the L1 in an L2 classroom. The use of L1 is flexible and various among the teachers. Generally, the facilitative role of L1 is regarded differently in different approaches and based on different situations and purposes of teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

In brief, the use of L1 varies among novice and experienced teachers or low-level and upper-level students and differentiates among teaching approaches. Different frequency rates of the L1 use suggest that the use of L1 relies on different classroom contexts and circumstances.

Purposes of L1 Use

Regardless of mixed findings from a permissible frequency of L1 use, reasons utilizing the first language are mainly presented in three categories, namely, cognitive, pedagogical and affective reasons. For cognitive reasons, language learners inevitably relate a plethora of information about their first language (such as syntax, lexical sources, etc.) to learn a second language (Rell, 2005). Consequently, the utilization of the mother tongue significantly enables their available asset to promote the L2 learning process. Macaro (2009) and Ellis (2005) backs up Rell (2005)'s notion that there is a connection between the L1 and the L2 conceptual stores. Both the two resources of lexical items are activated when a language is processed. Particularly, for non-balanced bilinguals, such as a beginner language learner, the connections with the first language is much stronger to the ones of the

second language; as a consequence, it would be an ignorance if avoiding the use of the L1 during the second language learning process.

For the pedagogical issues, the allowance of the first language use serves a humanistic function (Atkinson, 1987; Rell, 2005) when it acknowledges the learning as truly for adults with live experiences instead of child-like mimicking and guessing meaning from puppets and stuffed animals. In addition, the L1 use can make instruction clearer for students to complete the tasks and exercises successfully (Chambers, 1992). Moreover, using the L1 significantly save time for other activities and practices in the classroom (Tang, 2000). Furthermore, promoting the use of the L1 essentially increase students' participation in the classroom (James & Bourke, 1996). Besides, Polio & Duff (1994) provided five categories of L1 utilization consisting of grammar instruction, classroom management, administrative vocabulary, solidarity reflection, and teachers' English practice among which the most practical and pedagogical purpose of using L1 reported is related to vocabulary, particularly for vocabulary translation (Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002) and administrative vocabulary (Kraemer, 2006).

For the affective themes, Polio & Duff (1994) asserts that the teachers resort to use the L1 to strengthen relationship with students, to build rapport and to play a role as an "empathetic peer" (p. 318) since the close relationship between the teachers and the students helps to improve the students' learning. Besides, an opportunity to use the native language in a second/ foreign language classroom helps to reduce students' anxiety (Casado & Dereshiwsy, 2001), to increase students' confidence (Campbell, 1997), and to fit students' learning preferences (Schweers, 1999).

Generally, the reasons of using L1 are categorized into three intentional themes. L1

use firstly helps learners' available cognition assets facilitating their L2 learning. The employment of L1 in an L2 classroom secondly is beneficial for pedagogical practices of language teachers. Finally, the utilization of L1 plays an affective role to establish a good and personal rapport among teachers and students, which helps to motivate students' learning, reduce their anxiety, and so on. Indeed, these purposes are seemingly in accordance with Macaro (2009)'s three main underlying theories supporting the facilitative role of L1, namely cognitive processing theory, sociocultural theory and code-switching in the naturalistic environments.

Factors affecting the employment of L1

Beside the areas of research investigating purpose and frequency use of L1, there is another area of research examining influential factors for the use of L1. In a study by Duff & Polio (1990) observing thirteen teachers in two classes, a number of possible factors are listed, namely exercise types, department policy, and teacher training nature. Indeed, exercise-type is found as an influential factor for the teachers' utilization of L1 by subsequent studies of Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie (2002) and Kim & Elder (2005) in which grammatical exercises employ more L1 than task-based ones. In the same vein, Scott & Fuente (2008) conduct two conversation analysis studies focusing on grammatical-form tasks of two groups (06 pairs) of French and Spanish foreign language students in which L1 is allowed for one group (03 dyads) and L2 only is employed for the other group (the other 3 dyads). The results reveal that the group employing only L2 have a burden to produce and process metalinguistic talk while the group approving the use of L1 have more learners' participation. This highlights the correlation between grammatical tasks and the use of L1 in the study. In another study by Nakatsukasa & Loewen (2015) examining the teachers' use

of English (L1) in a Spanish (L2) classroom during form-focused episodes (FFE) at a university in the USA. The results similarly show that L1 used mostly in form-focused activities. In brief, task types such as grammatical tasks and activities mainly lead to the use of L1.

In a larger sampling investigation by Crawford (2004) investigating the views on the use of target language of 581 high school teachers, the results show that the use of L1 is higher in low-level classes than in upper level classes. The findings suggest students' proficiency level is a signal of another influential factor for the use of L1. Besides, Kraemer (2006) reveals that teaching experience is regarded as the factor as well because novice teachers employ more L1 than experienced ones. Other influential factors for the L1 employment of teachers are found such as classroom organization and management (Grim, 2010) and schedule of class meetings (White & Storch, 2012). Teachers with less weekly class meetings tend to use L1 as a pedagogical tool to save times for other class activities.

In addition to factors of task types, proficiency levels, teaching experience, timetabling, and pedagogical tools, teachers' beliefs and learners' perceptions are strongly indicative factors for the use of L1. In a study by Storch & Aldosari (2010), students' beliefs about the valuable opportunities of L2 practice in the classroom leads to the low frequency of L1 use. However, students in the NSW Adult Migrant English Service, Australia are reported by Chau (2007) that they use L1 as a learning strategy to communicate, give feedbacks and construct utterances of the L2 within the L1 shared groups. This metalinguistic function of L1 support can be found in another study of Scott & Fuente (2008).

Regarding the teachers' beliefs of employing the L1, Anh (2010) investigates

attitudes of 12 Vietnamese EFL teachers at three different universities in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. The results show that teachers advocate a various but limited use of Vietnamese in different contexts. Another longitudinal study by White & Storch (2012) investigating the use of L1 by a non-native teacher and a native one teaching French to intermediate students at two Australian universities show that the status of native-speaking is not a predictor for the teachers' use of L1. However, the use of L1 mainly relies on the teachers' belief and goals in their personal teaching contexts. A similar result found by Mcmillan & Turnbull (2009)'s study examining two teachers' beliefs in the use of English (L1) into French immersion classes (L2) in Canada in which there are two participants, a native speaker of French and a non-native one. The findings show that L1 use is influenced by the teachers' beliefs. More specifically, the native teacher prefers to use L1 because his beliefs (i) are influenced by growing up in a bilingual community; and, the native teacher (ii) cannot tolerate students' large ambiguity degree. In contrast, the non-native teacher admonishes the use of L1 since he is (i') affected by his university lecturers during the immersion program of French and (ii') patient for challenges of first few months in the immersion. Generally, there are contradictory and complex perceptions of teachers and learners on the issue.

Moore (2013) conducts a both quantitative and qualitative investigation into the context of the L1 use during students' peer interaction at a Japanese university in Japan. The results show that not only do individual factors (e.g, proficiency levels, individual preferences) influence the use of L1, but other situational factors (such as focus of the talk) strongly affect the L1 employment. In short, both individual and contextual factors have a strong impact on the employment of L1.

On the whole, task types (such as

grammar or form focused activities), proficiency level (i.e., low-level students), teaching experience (such as novice teachers), classroom management, few meeting schedules, teachers' beliefs, students' perceptions, learning strategies of the shared-L1 group and contextual factors lead to the utilization of the L1.

Reasons for the monolingual approach

Different from those advocating the L1 employment in an L2 classroom or the bilingual approaches, ones supporting the monolingual approaches or the L2-only in an L2 classroom provide some following reasons. First, Cook (2001) as cited in Anh (2010) assert that the process of L2 learning is similar to the one of L1 learning; consequently, exposure to the L2 as much as possible becomes of paramount importance in the L2 learning. As a result, L2 should be used solely in the classroom so that (i) students can be exposed purely to the target language (Ellis, 1984; Chaudron, 1988; Lightbown, 2001) and (ii) students will not miss an opportunity to be exposed to the only classroom context of L2 exposure (Lee, 2013; Ellis, 2008; MacDonald, 1993). Second, depending on the use of L1 makes students get used to the L1 use which negatively affects their appreciation of the value of target exposure they are exposed to (Bouangeune, 2009). Third, Sharma (2006) confirms that students will learn to internalize, to think and to use the L2 if they are exposed much to the L2 input. Forth, Nation (2003) warns that overusing the L1 probably demotivates students to use the L2. Fifth, the use of L1 can have a negative transfer to the second language learning (Anh, 2010; Osswald, 2010). Sixth, the use of L1 can challenge the teachers' viability of their teaching methods and their responsibilities to improve students' target language (Carless, 2008). Another reason disapproving the L1 use is that the L1 is often used inconsistently and randomly

(Bruhlmann, 2012). One more important feature advocating the monolingual approach is the importance of having native L2 speakers in L2 classroom since they are 'the best embodiment of the target and norm for learners' (Phillipson, 1992, p. 194 as cited in Anh, 2010). This philosophy has deeply influenced the mindset of a large numbers of learners, policy makers, parents, and training institutions (Osswald, 2010). In fact, having opportunities to learn with native speakers of the target language can help learners' language learning experience considerably. In brief, L2-only policy has its own advantages in language learning process and positively influences mindsets of a great number of language learners, policy makers, and language centers/ institutions.

Personally and currently, it is seemingly inevitable for the employment of the L1 in my L2 classroom with a frequency rate from ten to twenty per cent probably because we share the same L1. Among the categorized reasons, the purpose of my L1 utilization mainly for pedagogical and affective issues in which classroom management, abstract word translation, and close rapport mainly cause the use of my Vietnamese. Besides, it seems to me that my L1 employment depends on task types and the students' level of proficiency in which grammar and low-level proficiency students lead to my decision of using the L1 to save time for other activities, to clear up misunderstandings and to avoid ambiguity in the classroom.

In addition to the employment of the L1 by the teacher, from my observation, the use of Vietnamese by students definitely occurs as a learning strategy and a cognitive tool during the speaking task in which background knowledge and topic ideas are activated, discussed and negotiated before they present to their classmates even when the L1 use is being banned outright. In writing tasks, it is probable that the students utilize the L1 to

brainstorm their ideas before actual writing as well. It is probably presumable that the only reason for their Vietnamese use in an English classroom is that they take the available assets of the share-L1 community for granted. This review has significantly shed brighter light on my personal issues and provided me with the following concluding remarks.

3. Concluding remarks

Like two sides of a coin, using the L1 in the L2 classroom has its advantages and disadvantages as well as contains contradictions and complexities (Copland & Neokleous, 2011). A review has shown a mixed finding in the frequency of the L1 use and suggested considerable variations of the L1 frequency differently used among the classroom contexts and circumstances. However, the use of L1 should be carefully and consistently employed so that it is positively beneficial for the L2 learning. Another important implication from the purposes of L1 use is that it is used productively for cognitive enhancement, pedagogical tools and close rapport establishment among teachers and students.

Consequently, L1 should not be prohibited outright; but it should be consciously used with understanding and based on pedagogical decisions. Indeed, there are two beneficial pedagogical strategies encouraging the production of target language presented by Carless (2008), namely language monitor and incentives.

Since there have been contradictory perceptions and beliefs on the L1 use among teachers and students, there is a necessity of a clearer institutional policy on the inclusive use of L1. By doing this, teachers are seemingly able to measure their perceptions of L1 inclusion compared with the institutional policy, to eliminate their ambiguity as well as to increase their efficacy. Furthermore, the emergent use of L1 occurring inevitably in a L2 classroom helps instructors, policy makers and language learners develop an awareness of natural occurrence of L1 in a classroom context (Moore, 2013). As a result, a method possibly optimizing the benefit of L1 and providing a framework of appropriate time of L1 use in the L2 classroom should be presented (Samar & Moradkhani, 2014).

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