

Using Vietnamese in English Foreign Language Classroom of NonEnglish First Year Students at Dong Nai University Benefits from the Perspective of Teachers and Students

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Received: 20/9/2024; Accepted: 25/9/2024; Published: 4/10/2024

Abstract: *The integration of bilingualism into English language teaching has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a second or foreign language, not the first language. This research examines the use of Vietnamese for non – English first year students at Dong Nai University and also examines the perceived advantages of bilingual instruction, such as improved comprehension, enhanced language proficiency and reduce students' anxiety... Moreover, the research explores how Vietnamese influences language attitudes and identities among teachers and students. Additionally, the study examines the role of Vietnamese in promoting inclusivity and meeting diverse learning needs, particularly for students with low English proficiency levels.*

Keywords: *English as a second or foreign language, Vietnamese for non – English first year students, Dong Nai University, role of Vietnamese, students with low English proficiency levels.*

1. Introduction

The inclusion of using the native language in foreign language education is a contentious topic, sparking debate among scholars. While some academics are against its use in educational contexts, others argue that it aids learning. Various teaching methods attribute different roles to the native tongue. This research advocates for enhancing English instruction in English Foreign Language (EFL) classes while also permitting the use of the native language in specific circumstances. When Vietnamese is not overused and its use is adjusted to the specific context of each class, it can be an effective tool in the English classroom. The findings of this study highlight the potential benefits of using Vietnamese in situations such as explaining new vocabulary, especially technical terms and abstract concepts, in English language teaching at Dong Nai University. Literally, freshmen or beginners do not have much vocabularies to express themselves properly and teachers have to switch from English to Vietnamese when it is necessary in specific situations. 60 Vietnamese first year students studying English as a foreign language at Dong Nai University in their first semester and 3 teachers from Foreign Language Faculty teaching English for non- English majored students joined in the research. Three teachers and 3 students joined in

the interview, 3 teachers and 60 students answered the questionnaires with 2 separated parts for teachers and students. Most of students come from countryside, some of them are ethnic minorities. 20 students were from Faculty of Economics, 20 students were from Faculty of Technology, and the last 20 students were from Faculty of Kindergarten-Elementary Education. The research was conducted in October, 2023 in the first semester at Dong Nai University.

2. Content

2.1. Teachers' Perceptions of Benefits of Vietnamese Use

Many linguists justify their opinion on the use of the mother tongue in English class. They think that this use is necessary and effective in low proficiency level class of English.

In the interview, Teacher 1 agreed with the other teachers and affirms that using Vietnamese arises the motivation of her students and stresses that this use should be occasionally used. In brief, the use of the mother tongue helps the learners to be extrinsically motivated through the positive engagement that the mother tongue offers; as well as, grows the intrinsic motivation which is more valuable through the desire of achieving their goal of acquiring and enhancing their English language.

Teacher 2 believed that motivation is linked to

the learners understanding of the subject matter. She said: “If students understand the target language then they are capable of participating, and what is known in foreign language teaching is that the mother tongue use is a good strategy of explaining what is hard to grasp”.

Teacher 3 stated that students face daily issues with anxiety and stress what prevent them to learn the language, but the usage of mother tongue can decrease the learners’ fear of the language and encourage them to be more familiar with it. “Based on my own experiences, I can affirm that students exhibit high motivation and engagement when learning English through their native language, perceiving their English skills as both a reflection of their identity”, she added.

Teacher 2 clarified her point of view: “Language is a vehicle for cultural aspects. Alternatively, cultural differences and similarities can be highlighted to help learners accept and tolerate differences while at the same time preserve their cultural uniqueness. This can be done through various activities where Vietnamese plays an important role. Students may be given a set of proverbs in the target language and be asked to find the corresponding ones in their mother tongue if they exist. If not, they try to translate the proverbs into their language. It might be very helpful to detect cultural differences or similarities”.

In addition, many failures in tests are due to learner’s lack of understanding of instructions. Vietnamese can be used to tackle this issue, helping students to understand what is exactly asked from them. Of course, students have most of the lesson spoken and written in a foreign language, but the native language cannot be ignored in low-level English class of freshmen in Dong Nai University.

The findings indicated several scenarios where Vietnamese should be used in English language teaching. The most common situations were ‘explaining complex grammatical rules’ (100%), “improving student comprehension” (100%), “explaining new words effectively” (100%), “reducing students’ anxiety” (100%), “checking comprehension” (100%) “translating difficult vocabulary” (66.66%), “giving instructions for activities” (66.66%) and “enhancing participation” (66.66%).

Most of teachers assumed that using Vietnamese in some specific situations is the way to help their

students understand easily and reduce their stress when they try to express themselves in English but they fail to do it many times. In some cases, all teachers have to use mother tongue as the last solution that may help the learner to understand and grasp the lesson as needed. However, these situations should be flexible based on the context of a specific class, as Teacher 1 pointed out in the interview: “Depending on the class context, the teacher can decide when to use Vietnamese. For example, in a low-level English class, grammar and new words might be explained in Vietnamese. In a higher-level class, these explanations might initially be in English, with Vietnamese used only if students are confused. As students’ English skills are improved, the use of Vietnamese should be decreased. If the English explanations are well understood, I will continue lessons without using Vietnamese”.

As the answers reveal, teachers usually choose Vietnamese as the last solution and believe that it may help the learner to understand and grasp the lesson as needed in some ways. All of the three teachers think Vietnamese use can improve student comprehension, reduce students’ anxiety and explaining new words effectively. Two of them think mother tongue helps enhance students’ participation.

The use of Vietnamese in English instruction does not prevent the learning of a second language; rather, it can facilitate it. It is hoped that these insights will lead to greater acknowledgment of the native language’s role in the foreign language classroom and will encourage teachers to feel more comfortable using mother tongue or to permitting its use during instruction.

The first language serves as a foundation for acquiring a second language. Utilizing Vietnamese in English classes can be beneficial for freshmen facing language barriers. Allowing students to use their native language to clarify concepts or ask questions can enhance their understanding and overall learning experience.

2.2. Students’ Perceptions of Benefits of Vietnamese Use

The results of the student interview showed that the vast majority of students find the use of Vietnamese in classroom beneficial. Based on these responses, most students think positively about using their mother tongue in English classrooms.

Student 1 who is a first year student of Faculty of Economics assumed that “using some mother tongue in English lessons motivates me, and makes the learning process easier and more interesting for me because I don’t understand much in English”.

Student 2 – a first year student of Faculty of Kindergarten and Elementary Education answered when she was asked about the benefit of using Vietnamese in her class that: “Both my teacher and I try to use English as much as possible, but using only target language in class has many drawbacks perceived by the teachers who implement only English in their lessons and students who have low level of English proficiency don’t understand much”.

Student 3 – an ethnic minority who is a first year student of Technology Faculty said in the interview: “I have to struggle with English since I entered the university, especially the grammar points. I usually ask my teacher again and again in Vietnamese to make sure that I did understand the English grammar points in the right way”. Obviously, Vietnamese in some cases becomes a precious tool in helping students to learn the target language more adequately and in the effective way.

Actually, students may face difficulty in understanding some words meanings, but with using Vietnamese, they can overcome this issue when their teachers say these words’ equivalence in Vietnamese. In some cases, it facilitates and speeds up the process of learning. Some better students can understand that lesson in English, but explaining it again in their mother tongue increases their comprehension of it and helps them memorize it better.

Collecting all the answer sheets for a list of questions about students’ perceptions toward using mother tongue in EFL class, we were not so surprised of the answers. It is obvious from the response that most students, 91.6 % students would be more motivated, while 8.4 % would not experience any change in motivation because maybe English is a tough subject to them. The study also investigated whether students felt they received sufficient support in Vietnamese while studying English. It revealed that 75% of the students felt they had adequate support if teacher used Vietnamese when they didn’t understand or misunderstood what the teacher was saying while 15% of the students were

slightly agree. This is likely because most of the students interviewed were at a low level of English proficiency.

Another set of questions focused on students’ feelings when teachers used English they did not understand much. 15% of the respondents felt neutral or moderate when they tried to understand the instruction in an unfamiliar language while 75% of them felt “less lost”. About 85% were positive, noting it was acceptable as the teacher could also provide explanations for difficult concepts in a language they understood that is Vietnamese - their mother tongue. In fact, most the students had negative feelings, describing their emotions as strange, confused, uncomfortable, sad, uncertain, and embarrassed if teacher used only English without further explanation or instruction in Vietnamese. Therefore, 100% of the students in the surveys agreed that it is acceptable when teachers use English to explain grammar points which are so different in comparison of Vietnamese ones.

3. Conclusion

How the use of Vietnamese in English classroom is evaluated depends on when and what amount of first language is used for the interaction between teacher and students with low English proficiency. This reality explains why in some cases of teaching English, teachers and students are obligated to explain instructions, grammar or translation in Vietnamese to confirm that students have understood what their teacher has been talking instead of struggling to figure out what is teacher lecturing. In conclusion, using Vietnamese in teaching English to students with low proficiency levels can be highly effective when implemented strategically.

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