

Should teachers use Vietnamese in teaching listening & speaking skills to students at elementary English proficiency? (A case study at An Giang University)

Dương Thị Diễm Phúc*

*An Giang University – VietNam National University Ho Chi Minh City

Received: 6/3/2023; Accepted: 13/3/2023; Published: 20/3/2023

Abstract: Using learners' L1 (first language/ mother tongue) in a language classroom is a controversial discussion among language teachers and educators. Actually, while many educators believe L1 can facilitate learners' acquisition of L2 (a second language) or a foreign language, others reject this notion for their belief that L1 can bring more harm than benefits to learners' language acquisition. In this article, the researcher discusses the advantages and drawbacks of using L1 (Vietnamese) in teaching English, and proposes the solutions to increase the effectiveness of L1 that help teaching to gain the best results, indicates the percentages of using L1 that teachers applied could satisfy students' requirements when learning English listening and speaking skills at the elementary level at An Giang University (AGU).

Keywords: Mother tongue, English, Vietnamese, language acquisition, teaching, learning

1. Introduction

Learning foreign languages, especially English, is becoming popular. Educators are exploring and promoting teaching methods to enhance and accelerate learners' language acquisition. One of these methods is using L1 in a language classroom, which raises two questions: "Should or should not teachers use L1 in teaching English?" and "How many percent of L1 and English used bring the most beneficial to learners' language acquisition?"

In fact, a number of English educators and linguistics believe that using the mother tongue will limit learners' ability to acquire studied language (Krashen, 1981; McDonald, 1993; Auerbach, 1993; Atkinson, 1993; Sligson, 1997; and Ellis, 2005). In contrast, there are still many opinions in favor of using the mother tongue when teaching English because of its benefits as helping learners understand the content of the lesson faster and easier; and speeding up the process of acquiring a new language (Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002, Bouanguene, 2009; Timor, 2012; Mohebbi&Alavi, 2014 cited in Ibrahim, 2019).

2. Literature review

2.1. Effectiveness of using L1 (Vietnamese) in teaching English

The major effect of using the mother tongue in the classroom is saving much both learners and teachers' time (Green, 1970, Bran, 2015; Lewis, 1986). In case that complex grammar, abstract vocabulary, idioms

and proverbs cannot be explained by modified pictures or equivalent words, L1 can be a good choice. L1 also proceeds learners' comprehension. If they understand the content of the lectures, they will remember and use that knowledge more easily (Arkinson, 1987).

The mother tongue is also applied to help learners distinguish the differences between sounds when they learn the pronunciation of the language learnt. For example, when learning the sounds /e/ and /æ/, for students who have just approached English, if the teacher uses Vietnamese to explain the position of the tongue and lips when pronouncing these two sounds, it will help students understand and pronounce them better.

For students who are new to the language or whose level is still low, using their mother tongue to guide classroom activities will help students reduce stress, better understand the content, classroom activities and make the practice process easier; so learners' language acquisition is more favorable (Lewis, 1986; Schweers, 1999). L1 also helps learners effectively reduce language barriers and increase confidence in learning new languages (Krashen, 1985).

2.2. Limitations of L1 (Vietnamese) applied in teaching English.

First, according to Elena Bran (2015), teachers will be considered unprofessional if they use their mother tongue in class. Since then, students do not trust the language knowledge that the teacher conveys. On the

other hand, if students and teachers use their mother tongue frequently in the classroom, students tend to prefer using their mother tongue while studying. Even if the students are required to use the language they are studying, they still form a habit of thinking in their mother tongue rather than thinking in the language they are learning.

Swain (1985) believes that the use and practice of the language studied in the classroom are more important than the instruction and explanation of grammar and vocabulary principles through the learners' first language.

Krashen (1981) and Mc.Donal (1993) stated that L1 used in the classroom negatively affects students' acquisition of a new language. Mc.Donal asserts that classroom is a majored environment where the learnt language is spoken and written; therefore, if teachers and students use their mother tongue, students will lose the opportunity to experience the language they are learning in practice (classroom). Agree with Krashen (1981) and Mc. Donal (1993), Auerbach (1993), Atkinson (1993), Sligson (1997), and Ellis (2005) state that the more students access to the language they are learning, the better and faster they acquire it. In addition, Sligson (1997) stated that when teachers use the language the students are learning in class, they create an authentic communication tool in that language. The teachers will help students practice listening vividly and have the opportunity to respond in the most natural language. In short, the more L1 teachers use in the classroom, the more it affects the language acquisition process of students.

2.3. Method

2.3.1. Participants

Questionnaires sent to first year students majoring in English at An Giang University via Google Forms. A statement of informed consent was included in the first part of the online survey, describing how the responses would be de-identified, stored, and secured. After a week, the researcher received 90 responses.

2.3.2. Instruments

The study used a quantitative approach, with the survey being a data collection tool. The researcher created questions by herself based on the ideas in the literature review. There are three parts to the questionnaire. The first part included participants' general information like their email addresses and study results in the Listening & Speaking A 2. In the second part, participants chose multiple responses for the questions in which they agreed or disagreed on the teacher's using Vietnamese in the English

listening and speaking A2 classroom. In the third part of the survey, the participants chose the percentage of Vietnamese and English teachers should use in the English listening and speaking A2 classroom, which brought the best efficiency for students' improving English proficiency.

To answer the research question – “Should teachers use Vietnamese in teaching listening and speaking skills to students at the elementary English proficiency?” and “How many percent of L1 and English used bring the most beneficial to learners' language acquisition?” the researcher based on the following hypotheses.

H1: Most participants might agree that teachers should use Vietnamese in teaching listening and speaking skills to students at the elementary English proficiency (A2 level).

H2: The percentages of using Vietnamese in English listening and speaking A2 classroom might be lower than 50%.

2.4. Results and discussion

2.4.1. Results

H1: Most participants might agree that teachers should use Vietnamese in teaching listening and speaking to students at the elementary English proficiency (A2 level).

The result from the survey shows that 87 out of 90 participants support their teachers using Vietnamese in Listening & Speaking A2 classrooms. The highest number of respondents (16 students) thought Vietnamese helped them understand the teacher's instructions correctly. One-sixth of respondents affirmed that they could understand lessons better thanks to Vietnamese. Thirteen respondents felt more confident when their teachers spoke Vietnamese in class because they understood the lesson content and the teacher's instructions. Eleven students believed that Vietnamese developed language learning skills because they could compare the differences between Vietnamese and English when learning vocabulary or structures. Ten respondents agreed that Vietnamese assisted them in comprehending the context of the lesson from which to practice listening & speaking English more logically. At the same time, eight and seven respondents agreed that they felt less stressed when listening and speaking English in class, understood their mistakes, and avoided repeating them. Only six of 87 respondents thought they could comprehensively understand vocabulary and grammar points in each lesson if their teachers spoke Vietnamese. Meanwhile, the number of respondents

who opposed the use of Vietnamese in the Listening & Speaking A2 classroom is just 3 of the whole. The main reasons for their disagreement are that when teachers speak in Vietnamese in class, they form a habit of expecting their teachers to explain the meaning of a word or grammar point in Vietnamese instead of trying to guess the meaning of that word or grammar point. Besides, they did not take the opportunity to listen & speak English thoroughly in class.

H2: The percentages of using Vietnamese in English listening and speaking A2 classroom might be lower than 50%.

Nearly a third of respondents suggested it was better if their teachers spoke 30% Vietnamese and 70 % English. Above one-fourth of respondents thought a balanced percentage of Vietnamese and English is better for them. One-sixth of respondents agreed that teachers should speak 40% Vietnamese and 60 % English or 20% Vietnamese and 80 % English. One-tenth of respondents suggested that teachers should speak only 10% Vietnamese and 90% English. Only 3 out of 90 respondents felt that 60% of Vietnamese and 40 % of English applied in class could be helpful for them.

2.4.2. Discussion

Although two controversial views still occurred in students' discussions, the number of students who supported teachers' use of Vietnamese in English listening and speaking classrooms at the elementary level (A2) outweighed the opposing ones.

Initially, the majority of respondents in this study thought that Vietnamese helped them understand their teachers' instructions correctly, so using L1 language to explain the teaching instructions could be considered the most effective solution to help elementary students know accurately the activities they had to do in each lesson; and then they could carry out classroom activities effectively. This finding was consistent with the study of Irahim (2019), which proved that students advocate using their native language to translate difficult grammar points, ambiguous vocabulary words, or instructions in classroom activities. According to Wills (1981), teachers should use L1 to explain the meaning and usages of new vocabulary, lesson objectives, check whether learners understand its content, and discuss the main ideas of the lessons and reading. L1 is also effective in initiating lessons or brainstorming new ideas to help learners feel more secure when approaching new lessons (Weschler, 1997). However, three out of 90 respondents in this study opposed teachers using Vietnamese in Listening

and speaking classrooms because they were afraid that they did not take an opportunity to listen & speak English thoroughly in class supported by the studies of Krashen (1981) and Mc.Donal (1993). Up to now, the researcher has not found any research which studied the percentage of Vietnamese and English languages applied in the listening and speaking classroom, except for the recent research done by Irahim (2019). This study indicated that using the mother tongue in a foreign language classroom is appropriate only for learners at a beginner or low language level or for younger learners. In contrast, students at a higher level do not expect their teachers to use a first language in the classroom, which is consistent with the result of this study in which the participants - students at the elementary English level suggested that teachers should use 30% Vietnamese and 70 % English in their listening and speaking A2 classroom to assist them in studying effectively.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the mother tongue (Vietnamese) has many benefits, which include saving time for teachers and students when learning difficult grammar points and complex vocabulary, reducing students' stress when participating in class lessons, increasing accuracy when writing English articles, and so on. Moreover, using Vietnamese in English classes also has some limitations, such as forming students' thinking habits in Vietnamese, affecting learner's language acquisition process when they lose the opportunity to learn and experience a new language in practice. However, whether or not to use Vietnamese or how to use it appropriately and effectively for English learners depends on many factors: learners' level, age, passion, and their excitement in the process of learning a new language.

Reference

1. Atkinson, D. (1987). *The mother tongue in the classroom: A neglected resource?* *ELT Journal*, 41(4), 241-247
2. Atkinson, D. (1993). *Teaching monolingual classes*. London: Longman.
3. Auerbach, E. (1993). *Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom*. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 9-32.
4. Bouanguene, S. (2009). *Using L1 in teaching vocabulary to low proficiency level students: A case study at the University of Laos*. *English language teaching journal*, 2(3), 186-193.
5. Bran, E. (2015). *Using L1 in the classroom: Monolingual and bilingual approached*. *Research and Science Today*, 2(10), 175-181.