

THE ROLE OF FIRST LANGUAGE IN EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of some of basic arguments of the use of L1 in L2 classroom, either against or in favor of it, and will particularly review the use of L1 in classroom of EFL adult learners in Indonesia. Despite to opponent arguments of L1 use, there are a number of proponent arguments from ESL/EFL professionals of its use. They argue that L1 use is beneficial for both teacher and student if it is used appropriately at appropriate times. The use of L1 in classroom is particularly helpful for teacher when helping engender security, conveying meaning of words, checking for comprehension, and or explaining grammatical rules.

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengupas tentang pendapat-pendapat yang mendasari penggunaan bahasa pertama (L1) di dalam kelas bahasa 2 (L2), baik yang menentang maupun yang mendukungnya. Tulisan ini khususnya akan membahas tentang penggunaan L1 di kelas EFL (bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing) bagi pelajar dewasa di Indonesia. Selain pendapat yang menolak penggunaan L1, ada ESL/EFL. Mereka berpendapat bahwa penggunaan L1 menguntungkan bagi guru dan murid jika digunakan pada saat dan waktu yang tepat. Secara khusus, penggunaan L1 di kelas akan membantu guru ketika akan menolong muridnya memberikan suasana yang aman dari bahaya, menjelaskan arti dari kata-kata, mengecek pemahaman dan juga menjelaskan aturan tata bahasa.

Key Words: Bahasa pertama (L1), Bahasa kedua (L2), Kelas bahasa asing (EFL).

BACKGROUND

There has been a lot of research and many debates on whether or not to use students' first language (L1) in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. Gabrielatos calls L1 "a bone of contention" which would mean that it has long been argued that the L1 should not be used in classroom. He argues that the Direct Method which was interpreted by Berlitz in late 1800s was an example of the

opposition of L1 use in the classroom.¹ Whereas, Prodromou claims that “until recently, the mother tongue in the EFL classroom has been a skeleton in the cupboard The skeleton has been there all the time; we just haven’t wanted to talk about it”, (as cited in Gabrielatos).² These views may reflect the different views of English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals on the use of L1 in classroom.

Those who have been teaching communicative English classrooms would agree to say that the use of the target language should be maximized and then the use of the first language should be minimized or even prohibited at all learning stages. This is to reach one of the goals of a communicative classroom or atmosphere where the students can use the target language as much as possible. In this way, the students are expected to get as much as exposure to the target language. However, the approach of “English only” can, then, be a “constraint” for teachers teaching adult learners in an EFL classroom where teacher and students use the same mother tongue. In such a classroom, the temptation to use the L1, both on the part of the teacher and students, are hard to resist. In line with this, Larrea writes that, by using a 100% “English only” approach, teacher can face a difficult situation, acting like a “contortionist” when trying to explain a language item while a simple translation could have saved a great amount of teacher’s and students’ time.³

In addition, Rinvoluceri contends that a teacher may have to engage in “bizarre” behaviors when trying to explain the meaning of a certain word using mime. He, then, writes “I realized that to know nothing about my students in their Mother Tongue linguistic context was professionally uncomfortable”.⁴ This assertion led him to create exercises that employ both the target language and students' mother tongue.

¹Gabrielatos, C., “L1 use in ELT, Not a Skeleton, but Bone of Contention”, *Bridges* Vol. 6, 2000, p. 33-35.

²Prodromou, L., quoted in Gabrielatos, C. 2001. “L1 use in ELT ...”, p.1.

³Larrea, E., “Should we (or should we not) use L1 in the Communicative English Classroom”, Accessed from http://idiomas.up.edu.pe/_data/idiomas/publicacion/20050126105713_.pdf p. 3, on October 20, 2006.

⁴Rinvoluceri, M. “Mother Tongue in the Foreign Language Classroom. Why and How?” *Modern English* Vol. 10, No. 2, 2001.p. 42.

As has been said, an EFL teacher may find it hard to explain an exact meaning of a certain word in English; for example, would it be easy for the teacher to explain the meaning of “BELIEF” in English to students with lower level of English proficiency? Should the teacher use L1, the students might understand the word easily because they have known such term in their first language. Here, the use of L1 not only saves time but also help expedite students’ comprehension.

From my own English teaching experience in my home country of Indonesia, where English is still considered a foreign language, I still used the students’ L1 for a certain percentage during teaching-learning process. I fully understood and agreed that the use of L1 in EFL classroom should be minimized as much as possible but felt the need to use L1 for certain situations. This made me feel guilty. Even with the feeling of “guilt”, I had to use my students’ L1 (especially when I taught adults with low level of English proficiency) when I was trying to explain either meanings of certain words or complex grammatical structures, such as adjective clauses, gerunds, conditional sentences, etc. I felt guilty due to the fact that I fully understood that students would benefit a lot from the target language exposure but I could not entirely rely on the target language when trying to facilitate learning. Here, I might also have felt guiltier if my students did not fully learn simply because I did not allow L1 to be spoken in class.

As a matter of fact, I was trained how to teach English communicatively, and I was also taught not to use or allow my students to use L1 in classroom. In order to be more communicative, I was learning a number of techniques to use when teaching, such as using contexts, using realia, negotiating the meaning and, etc if I come across an unknown word. Therefore, I always tried to use the target language during teaching-learning process but, occasionally, I still had to give up using L2 and started using L1. This was caused by the fact that most of students did not fully understand (or even did not understand at all) my explanation in English. This fact happened due to students’ poor English proficiency.

Even though there are arguments against the use of L1 in classroom, there are also great deals of arguments revealing that L1 use is useful in classroom if it is used appropriately and wisely. In this sense, a teacher needs to learn how and when to use the L1 in an L2 class so that the L1 would instead inhibit students’ learning of the target language (L2).

Review of Literature

A common debate for EFL teachers is deciding the right balance between using English and using students' first language in the classroom. In addition, most of the teachers would reject the use of L1 in classroom which is based on the claim that the more English is used; the quicker the students will learn. Referring to the notion of avoiding L1 use in classroom, Cook (2001) asserts that "one argument for avoiding the first language is that children learn their first language because they do not have a second language, another argument is students also need to separate L1 from L2..."⁵ These arguments are reflected by a "compartmentalization" claim that successful L2 learning relates to the separation of L2 from L1. This means that "the goal of L2 teaching is coordinate bilingualism, in which the two languages form distinct systems in the mind, rather than compound bilingualism, in which they form a single compound system" says Weinreich (as cited in Cook).⁶ According to this theory, L2 learning should happen solely through the target language rather than linking to L1.

In line with this point, Ellis points out that "the role of L1 in classroom is a negative one because L1 gets in the way or interferes with the learning of L2, such as the features of the L1 are transferred into L2"⁷. He explains that this interference is due to what is referred to as "proactive inhibition" by which previous language learning prevents or inhibits the learning of a new language.⁸

In addition, Krashen asserts that "people who learn a foreign language do not basically follow the same route as they acquire their mother tongue. Therefore, the use of L1 in learning process should be minimized" (as cited in Tang).⁹ In simple word, this assertion suggests that L1 is not necessarily needed as a medium in learning L2. This also happens when a child learns an L1 and he/she does not need another language.

⁵Cook, V., "Using the First Language in The Classroom", *Canadian Modern Language Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2001, p. 5-6.

⁶Weinreic., quoted Cook, V. 2001. "Using the First Language...", 1953, p.6.

⁷Ellis, R. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 19.

⁸Ellis, R. *Understanding ...*, 1985, p. 22.

⁹Krashen, 1981, quoted in Tang, J. 2002. "Using L1 in the English classroom", Accessed from <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol40/no1/p36.htm>, p. 1, on November 8, 2006.

In opposition to all of the above arguments, some second language acquisition (SLA) experts argue that L1 use in classroom is somehow useful and helpful. Nunan and Lamb assert that “EFL teachers working with monolingual students at lower levels of English proficiency find prohibition of the mother tongue to be practically impossible” (as cited in Tang).¹⁰ In other words, in EFL setting, it is difficult for a teacher to facilitate learning without any interference or use of students’ L1. Regarding this point, Ross claims that “translation is a useful language learning tool in the ordinary classroom; the real usefulness of translation in the EFL classroom lies in exploiting it in order to compare grammar, vocabulary, word order, and other language points in English and the student’s mother tongue” (as cited in Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene).¹¹ If the students then become aware of the differences between the two languages, the “interference” will be likely be minimized.

In addition, Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene then point out that “no one would argue that the human way of thinking is shaped by a first language, which always interferes with a foreign language”.¹² Therefore, it is not surprising to find an EFL learner who will always try to refer to his/her mother tongue in response to a question in a classroom discussion before answering it. Even if he/she fully understands the question, he/she still find it hard to answer the question immediately since he/she will need some time to “translate” the answer in the mother tongue before expressing it in English. What Auerbach writes in her article seems to support the assertion. She quotes teachers from Centro Presente (an ESL program for Central Americas in Boston) who argue that “students do not just start thinking in L2, allowing for the ideas exploration in L1 supports a gradual, developmental process in which use of the L1 drops off naturally when it becomes less necessary”.¹³

¹⁰Nunan & Lamb. quoted in Tang, J. 2002. “Using L1 ...”, 1996, p. 1.

¹¹ Ross. 2000, quoted in Januleviciene, V., & Kavaliauskiene, G., “Promoting the Fifth Skill in Teaching ESP”, *English for Specific Purposes*. Accessed from http://www.esp-world.info/Articles_2/Promoting%20the%20Fifth%20Skill%20in%20Teaching%20ESP.html, 2002, p. 7, accessed on January 15, 2013.

¹²Januleviciene, V., &Kavaliauskiene, G. “Promoting the fifth skill ...”, 2002, p. 8.

¹³Auerbach, R.E., The Politics of the ESL Classroom: Issues of Power in Pedagogical Choices. In Tollefson, J.W (Eds.), *Power in Inequality in Language Education* (pp.9-33). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 27.

Furthermore, supports for L1 uses also come from a number of studies; for example, Sweers conducted research on the use of L1 in his monolingual Spanish speaking classes in Puerto Rico. From the study, he finds that over 80% of the students believe the use of L1 in classroom is useful, (as cited in Ferrer).¹⁴ Prodromou¹⁵, another EFL professional, also conducted research on the use of L1 in classrooms with the sample of 300 monolingual Greek students. He conducted the research on three levels; beginner, intermediate, and advanced. A relatively high percentage of beginner and intermediate students (between 58% and 66%) indicated that the teacher should use L1 in classroom, while only a small percentage of advanced students (about 29%) believe that L1 use in class is helpful. In their study, Scott and De La Fuente provided an insight on the role of L1 when pairs of intermediate-level college learners of French and Spanish are engaged in consciousness-raising, form-focused grammar tasks. Their findings revealed that the use of L1 for consciousness-raising and form-focused grammar tasks “may reduce cognitive overload, sustain collaborative interaction, and foster the development of metalinguistic terminology”.¹⁶ Scott and Fuente’s study present evidence that “students’ two languages” are helpful when dealing with complicated tasks. From the studies, we can learn that most students, especially those in lower levels of English proficiency in monolingual classes, still believe that L1 is meaningful.

Atkinson (1993) points out that, in terms of teaching monolingual class, “a careful, limited use of L1 to help students get the maximum benefit from activities which in other respects will be carried out in the target language” (as cited in Prodromou).¹⁷ On the whole, despite the opponent arguments of its use, L1 is seen as useful if it is used properly in regard to successful foreign language learning.

¹⁴Sweers. quoted in Ferrer, V. “The Mother Tongue in the Classroom: Cross-Linguistic Comparison, Noticing and Explicit Knowledge”. 1999, accessed from http://www.teachenglishworldwide.com/Articles/Ferrer_mother%20tongue%20in%20the%20classroom.pdf, p. 1-2, on January 15, 2013.

¹⁵Prodromou, L.. “From Mother Tongue to Other Tongue”. 2001, accessed from http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/mother_tongue.shtml, on October 25, 2006.

¹⁶Scott, V. M., & De La Fuente, M. J. “What’s the problem? L2 learners use of the L1 during consciousness-raising, form-focused task”. *Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 92, 1, 2008, p. 109-110.

¹⁷Atkinson, quoted in Prodromou. 2001. “From Mother Tongue to Other Tongue”, 1993, p. 1.

How and When Would L1 be Used Properly in EFL Classroom?

It is understandable some EFL professionals argue that L1 use is inevitable in classroom. In order to have a communicative EFL classroom, a teacher should use L1 wisely and judiciously. Atkinson, in this case, asserts “it is impossible to talk about a right balance or a perfect model for using L1. It is not that simple. L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and in appropriate ways” (as cited in Larrea).¹⁸

How can L1 be used appropriately? When teaching, I used L1 in certain cases, for example, when I tried to explain the different meaning of a grammatical item such as “verbs + gerund and or verbs + infinitives”, (e.g the meaning of verb “remember + gerund/remember + infinitive”). I would initially present such patterns in English and then explained the meaning of the grammatical patterns in L1 before I asked the students to practice. I found it easier to explain this confusing item in L1 and the students seemed to better understand.

L1 also provides security for the students. Feeling secure may facilitate students’ confidence. Regarding this point, Auerbach claims that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learner’s lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English”, (as cited in Larrea).¹⁹ In EFL classrooms, there are students who are very shy and have high level of anxiety and using the target language can embarrass them especially when making mistakes. In this case, L1 can help the students feel more comfortable, and then they will eventually gain confidence to use the target language. I agree that L1 may really help students to feel more secure and thus they are not losing their motivation to learn. It was very often, in my class, other students would laugh at others who made mistakes in using English. Once this happened, the students would not want to use the target language anymore.

Gill points out that L1 is also helpful for classroom management. This can happen when a teacher needs to explain or tell the class about something which requires language above students’ present current level.²⁰ For example, a teacher

¹⁸ Atkinson. 1993, quoted in Larrea, E. “Should we (or should we not) Use L1 ...”, p. 3.

¹⁹ Auerbach, R.E. 1993, quoted in Larrea, E. Should we (or should we not) use L1 ...”, p. 3

²⁰ Gill, S. “The L1 in the L2 Classroom”. 2005, accessed from <http://khoaanh.hcmup.edu.vn/modules.php>

might use L1 when explaining an instruction of a difficult task. Students need to understand what they have to do with the task.

In addition, Cook identifies some other possible examples of proper L1 use. L1 use in classroom would be beneficial for conveying and checking meaning of words or sentences. Sometimes there are words in the target language which are not easy to find correct meaning by simply giving synonyms. L1 really helps in giving quick meaning so that both teacher and students can save a great amount of time. The teacher can also use L1 to check students' comprehension upon particular learning materials.²¹ It would be easier for a teacher to just give the meaning of "SIN" in L1 or translate the word in L1, for instance. Regarding this point, McKeown states "this is probably because L1 translations are normally clear, short, and familiar, qualities which are very important in effective definitions", (as cited in Nation).²²

Cook also indicates that when explaining grammatical rules, teacher may benefit from the L1 use. When encountered with complicated grammatical rules, a teacher can use L1 to explain the meaning. In this case, Cook then concludes that "the main argument for using the L1 for grammar is efficiency of understanding by the students".²³ The role of L1 in these cases is then considered to help learners gain knowledge needed to reach a better level of L2 performance. This means that students have opportunities to better understand the contents of target language and tasks through students' first language.

When I taught English in my country (Indonesia), I always tried not to use my students' mother tongue during the teaching/learning process especially when facilitating speaking activities. However, I also had to end up using students' L1 when I explained students' errors, grammatical rules, and meaning of difficult words. If I insisted using L2, students seemed not to be receptive and enthusiastic to our classroom activities. Based on this experience, I believe, in these particular

op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=126&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0, on July 19, 2006.

²¹Cook, V, "Using the First Language in the Classroom...".

²²McKeown., quoted in Nation, P, "The Role of First Language in Foreign Language Learning". Accessed from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/june_2003_PN.php p. 3, 1993, on November 8, 2006

²³Cook, V. "Using the First Language in the Classroom...", 2001, p. 14.

cases, L1 will aid students' comprehension and save time for both students and teacher. I am convinced that L1 is an effective tool to help students understand L2 more comprehensibly in non-threatening ways. When I was learning English myself, my first language helped me learn complicated linguistic features or difficult words more comprehensively in a fast manner.

However, it is also not easy to decide when and how to use the L1 appropriately in classroom because it all depends on the classroom situation itself. The teacher should be pro active in controlling the classroom. In this case, Clanfield & Foord state that "teacher should decide when it may be beneficial to use L1 and why.... Encourage and approve of mother tongue use at chosen moment and in designated activities, and also explain to the students why these should be done". Clanfield & Foord then explain that if a teacher can do this, the classroom will likely be more authentic in regard to reflection of "the natural interplay of L1 and L2".²⁴

CONCLUSION

Although there are debates over the role of L1 in EFL classroom, studies have shown that L1 use may facilitate students to understand L2 better. In addition, L1 can be an important resource if it is used strategically for good reasons to help students build their awareness of the target language. However, we, as English teachers, should bear in mind that we should not overuse the L1 because using the target language as much as possible should still be the main goal of foreign language learning.

Learning a foreign language is not an easy process. Therefore, the teacher should be very much aware of when and where to use the mother tongue. This is important since students with different backgrounds will need different solutions.

²⁴Clanfield, L., & Floord, D., "Using L1 in the Classroom (in Defense of L1 Use in the Classroom Secondary and Adult). Accessed from <http://www.hltnmag.co.uk/jano3/martjano32.rtf>, 2000, p. 1, on January 15, 2013.

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Scott, V.M., & De La Fuente, M.J. "What's the problem? L2 Learners' Use of the L1 during Consciousness-Raising, Form-Focused Tasks", *Modern Language Journal*, 92, 1, 2008.