L1 USE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: TO PERMIT OR FORBID?

*RAMIAIDA DARMI, MOHD MUZHAFAIR IDRUS,
NOOR SAAZAI MAT SAAD & HAZLEENA BAHARUN
Faculty of Major Language Studies, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
*ramiaida@usim.edu.my


Keywords: first language, language tasks, speaking skill, teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the first language (L1) has been a debatable topic in the area of English language teaching from year to year. In the past, L1 use was strongly discouraged or prohibited in second language (L2) classes, as it was felt that such use would interfere with the development of the L2 (e.g., Odlin, 1989; Kellerman, 1995). Despite the believe that extensive use of the L2 in language classes is a crucial element of effective language teaching (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009; Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1988; Chi, 2000; Cook, 2001), empirical studies in the last two decades on L1 and L2 use have shown renewed debate about the relationship between L1 and L2 or target language (TL) use and learner’s views on L1 as a meaningful component in the learning process (Canagarajah, 2007; Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Butzkamm, 2003; Macaro, 2005; Cummins, 2009).

During the 1990s, Malaysia emphasized the ‘English only’ approach in the English language classes, and it is still a common belief among many Malaysian ESL teachers. However, L1 supporters argue for the use of L1 in the language classes. According to Butzkamm (2004, p. 19), foreign language learning and teaching should include the use of L1 as an aid to both understanding and expression. In addition, Inbar-Lourie (2010) believes that the L1 is a resource that learners bring to the language-learning experience, which should be utilized rather than ignored. Thus, this paper will discuss a study that investigated the use of L1 in English language classes, specifically among low proficiency L2 learners at tertiary level. Its aim is to explore whether L1 use should be permitted or forbidden in the language classroom.
MATERIALS

Use of L1 in L2 Language Classes

In language classes, studies have shown that L1 use has advantages for L2 learners. Nation (2003) discovered that in classrooms where all learners share the same L1 or national language, there is a tendency for tasks - conversation activities, discussion of intensive reading, preparation for writing, which are meant to be done in the L2, to actually be done in the L1. This is because use of the L1 is more natural with those who share the same L1, easier and more communicatively effective than the use of the L2, which can be embarrassing especially for shy learners and those who feel they are not very proficient in the L2 (Nation, 2003). Nunan (2003) believes that the L1 and L2 support one another as the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of achieving engagement with the meaning and content of what needs to be achieved in the L2, but reminds that its use should not be overused.

Apart from providing a form of scaffold in an L2 classroom, the use of the L1 also provides a social and cognitive space (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Carless, 2008; Butzkamm, 2003). Anton and DiCamilla (1998) found that the use of L1 is beneficial for language learning because it helps in the process and completion of tasks and creates a social and cognitive space, which allows learners to provide each other with assistance for the duration of the task. Carless (2008) views L1 use as a form of support for learners in facilitating their language acquisition, and allowing them to complete group or pair work without having to speak the L2 all the time (p. 331). Butzkamm (2003) regards L1 use as a cognitive and pedagogical resource, as it is always available, and provides the fastest, surest, most precise and most complete means of accessing a foreign language.

The use of L1 also enables in-depth discussion (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003), sustains involvement in the task, helps learners verbally control themselves, and assists learners to develop conscious awareness of what they know and do not know (Brooks et al., 1997). Inbar-Lourie (2010, p. 353) states that the learners’ L1 plays an essential role in L2 learning because linguistic elements, phonological awareness and metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies can be converted to the target language (TL) or L2. If the L1 use is rejected, learners’ identity will also be rejected and may cause learners to devalue their L1 use (Inbar-Lourie, 2010, p. 353). These uses of L1 show the importance of L1 use in the language class and reinforce the aim of this study as relevant in diverse language learning situations.

L1 Use in L2 Tasks-Based Classroom

The studies of tasks show that different tasks mainly contribute to different purpose of L1 use. Recent research on use of the mother tongue or L1 in task-based second language learning classrooms has shown positive contribution to social and cognitive functions (Carless, 2008; Alegria de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Storch & Aldosari, 2010) as well as pedagogical functions (Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Through the use of their L1, learners are able to maintain their attention, interest and involvement, and expand their expression of meaning, identity and humour (Carless, 2008). Learners also use their L1 to manage tasks and discuss grammar and vocabulary, focus attention and understand meaning, establish fruitful interaction and collaboration, think and self-regulate more quickly as well as transfer their cognitive, metacognitive and social skills to the L2 (Alegria de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2009, Baharun, 2015, Baharun & Zakaria, 2017).

Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) found that L1 use among learners can assist them to gain control of the task, work on high level tasks, as well as enabling them to provide each other with definitions of unknown words directly and successfully. In the L2 classroom, restricting or prohibiting the use of L1 means denying learners the opportunity of using an important tool (Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Nevertheless, use of the L1 may result in learners’ failure to practise and communicate using the target language, thus requiring a specified yet flexible view of mother tongue or L1 use in task-based classrooms (Carless, 2008).
Swain and Lapkin (2000; 1998; 1999) studied the use of L1 in task-based second language learning. Their study showed that collaborative dialogue (problem solving and knowledge building) in the L1 or L2 can mediate L2 learning. Their finding also showed that in jigsaw and dictogloss tasks, learners made use of their L1 most frequently for task management purposes. Other uses of the L1 in such tasks were to develop an understanding of the story and make sense of the requirements and content of the task, to focus attention on language form, vocabulary use and overall organization as well as to establish the tone and nature of their collaboration. Swain and Lapkin (2000) reported that if learners were not permitted to use the L1, the task presented to them may not be accomplished as effectively as possible, or may not be accomplished at all. They concluded that judicious use of the L1 can actually support L2 learning and use. Additionally, Baharun and Zakaria (2017) highlight L1 has the potential to contribute to learners’ language development particularly in their vocabulary development. This suggests that learners’ L1 has a role in facilitating their L2 learning process.

Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory for L1 Use in Language Learning

Studies that have explored L1 use in English language classrooms have frequently related it to the Vygostkyan sociocultural theory (SCT) (Levine, 2011; Anton & DiCamilla, 1999; Coyle, 2008; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). According to Vygotsky (1978), language is a mediating cognitive tool in all forms of higher-order mental processing. This means that language acts as a resource for higher mental functions to develop through interaction with more capable interlocutors. The higher mental functions are then internalized or processed. Once knowledge is internalized, the activity learnt in social interaction can be performed independently (Vygotsky, 1978). In SCT, when learners’ former knowledge is activated, it allows for active learner involvement in the learning process and for using the L1 as a means to scaffold learning and co-construct knowledge (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

THE STUDY

In this study, the researchers adopted the task-based language teaching in the English language classroom, specifically for low English proficiency learners. This is because it is believed that low proficiency learner participants would learn better through tasks. This belief is supported by Levine (2011), who states that teaching and learning in secondary and university language class is most effective within the framework of a principled, meaning and task-based approach as it responds to diverse learning styles and strategies, promotes learner autonomy and acknowledges the classroom as a sociocultural environment, which is surrounded by the complexity of L2 teaching and learning (p. 7). Other studies that have investigated L1 use within a task-based approach in the L2 classrooms also strengthened the belief in the need for an exploration of L1 within a task-based approach (Baharun & Zakaria, 2017; Carless, 2008; Alegria de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Storch & Aldosari, 2010). In this study, the researchers explored L1 learners’ language use in an English language class. Using the task-based approach, the researchers investigated whether L1 was used by the participants during task completion and if so, why?

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a qualitative approach in conducting this study. This is because the aim of the study was to investigate learners’ L1 use during task completion in the English language (L2) class. Using a qualitative method allowed the researchers to gain indepth and detailed experience of the learners’ actual language use while completing the tasks.

The data were collected through a few sessions of the English language class as there were three types of communicative tasks involved – problem solving (PS), decision making
(DM), and opinion exchange (OE) tasks. These are regarded as pedagogical tasks, which are communicative and have the potential to trigger second language learning processes and strategies, and demand learners’ higher-order thinking (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 162). According to Pica et al. (1993), language is best taught and learned through interaction; thus, employing communicative tasks would allow learners to use language to exchange information and communicate ideas, share ideas and opinions, collaborate towards a single goal, or compete to achieve individual goals.

All the tasks required the participants to engage in interaction and discuss during task completion. As the aim of the study was to explore the need for learners’ L1 use in English language classes, the researchers examined each pair’s discussion when completing the tasks. By doing so, the researchers would gain insights on how the participants interacted with their partners and whether there was L1 use during task completion.

Participants

The study involved fourteen first year students from a public university in Malaysia, who had low English language proficiency. This was determined through their MUET results, with either Band 1 or 2. Based on MUET band descriptors, the participants have ‘limited command of the language, lack expressiveness, fluency and appropriacy (inaccurate use of the language resulting in breakdown in communication), limited understanding of language and contexts, and limited ability to function in the language’ or have ‘poor command of the language, are unable to use language to express ideas (inaccurate use of the language resulting in frequent breakdowns in communication), have little or poor understanding of language and contexts, and hardly able to function in the language’ (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006). The researchers also purposively chose Malay learners, as they share the same L1 as the researchers. This would ease understanding and prevent misinterpretation of the language used by the participants during the data collection period.

Data Collection

The main instrument used to collect the data in this study was the task recordings. An MP3 was placed in front of each pair. Their oral interaction during task completion was recorded. The recordings were done from the beginning to the end of each class hour. The task recordings aimed at capturing the participants’ language use in the class when completing the tasks. These audio recordings were later transcribed verbatim and coded based on the need for the participants’ use of their L1.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively. Based on the data gathered as well as purposes/categories gathered from past studies, the pair interactions were examined for the purposes of L1 use during task completion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysed exhibited that all the pairs of learners were found to be using their L1 during the completion of the tasks given. L1 use was identified for nine different purposes, which related to past studies mentioned earlier – to explain a task, to discuss requirement of a task, to negotiate roles, to give instructions, to maintain dialogue, to check understanding of language, to clarify meaning, to clarify linguistic gaps, and to explore and expand content. The purposes were then coded and categorised into four groups: task management, interpersonal use, language and content management. Figure 1 illustrates the categories of purposes for L1 use and their elaborated purposes.
Figure 1: Categories of purposes for L1 use

From the task recordings, the researchers also analysed the number of pairs who used their L1 in the tasks and for what purposes. This is represented in Table 1. In Table 1, the ticks (√) represents the purposes identified among participants, while the shaded crosses (X) show the pair who did not use the identified purposes in the tasks.

Table 1: Purpose of L1 use by participants (pairs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task Type</th>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Task management</th>
<th>Interpersonal use</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving (PS)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion Exchange (OE)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making (DM)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table, we can see that all the pairs used their L1 for language purposes in all types of tasks; while one pair did not use their L1 for task management (Pair E in PS task), and for interpersonal use (Pair E in PS task). In general, the participants used their L1 across all tasks for almost similar purposes.
The extracts below show examples of transcripts taken from task recordings of participants’ interaction when completing the tasks.

**Task management**

1. To explain task
   Extract 1
   KHA meet sister MARY?
   RAJ hah MARY. ((student reads the sentence on the board). maybe PETER at LONDON (student reads the sentence on the board)) susunan arrange who PETER where ni when ni (We have to arrange which is PETER, where he is and when it was.)

2. To discuss requirement of task
   Extract 2
   HAS {X} dia macam ni. madam cakap a: kita kena buat contoh dulu berdasarkan kepada siapa. di mana. kenapa (It’s like this, we have to provide an example first based on who, where and why.)
   TIN kenapa (Why.)
   HAS kalau boleh kan ambil {X} lagi lah sebab ini dah masuk sekali {X} is the important eh penting (If possible, take {X} again because it’s included as an important one.)

**Interpersonal use**

3. To negotiate roles
   Extract 3
   MAS ah? macam mana? (how?)
   JIH dah. cuba baca (it’s done, just try and read it)
   MAS yelah. kita pegang. so nanti kita bawa satu je. apa ni. a:: (yes, we hold it so later we just need to bring one of it only)

4. To give instructions
   Extract 4
   IDA kejap (wait)

5. To maintain dialogue
   Extract 5
   KHA your idea short or long? tengok tengok tengok. panjangnya (let me see. It’s long.)
   RAJ ah ye ke? (really?)

**Language**

6. To check understanding
   Extract 6
   FAR hah? starter tu benda mula mula nak makan tu kan? (Starter is the food that you start with right?)
   SIT hah

(Transcript PS Pair C)
(Transcript PS Pair F)
(Transcript OE Pair G)
(Transcript DM Pair B)
(Transcript OE Pair C)
(Transcript DM Pair E)
7. To clarify meaning
   Extract 7
   JIH  knife boleh? (What about knife?)
   MAS  knife?
   JIH  pisau (knife)

8. To clarify linguistic gaps
   Extract 8
   UMU  confident confident
   IDA  what? for what?
   UMU  confident. about the: e:r nak cakap macam mana nak kata lebih konfiden tentang BAHASA ENGLISH tu. macam mana ah? macam mana aku nak buat ayat ni?
   (How do we say ‘more confident about ENGLISH’? how do I make the sentence for that?)

9. To explore and expand content
   Extract 9
   LIA  I think you give kamera{camera}
   YAH  camera? boleh ke? macam mana camera tadi? apa namanya tadi? {L}
   (Can we give camera? What was it called just now?)
   LIA  maknanya eh {X} gambar ni lah
   ({X} means this picture.)

The data in the study prove that there is a need for L1 use. Based on the findings, the participants used their L1 in an L2 class for different purposes and was very much shaped by the task types they engaged in. For low-cognitive demand tasks, L1 use was found for interpersonal use, task management and language purposes, while for high-cognitive demand tasks, L1 use was dominantly for content management purposes. It is clear that task types and their cognitive demands play a role in the purposes of L1 use by the participants. It is necessary to allow L2 learners to provide ideas in relation to the tasks given to them in class. Without allowing their L1 use, it may hinder them from expressing the ideas that they have in mind due to limited L2 vocabulary and other reasons. The use of the L1 was purposeful as it was used systematically, as revealed in the purposes for L1 use in the tasks. Clearly, it was when the participants used their shared L1 that they were able to communicate. The use of L1 had the potential to contribute to the participants’ language development. These findings appear to be consistent with studies on interaction in foreign language contexts (e.g., de la Colina & Garcia Mayo, 2007, 2009; Ganem Gutierrez, 2008; Scott & de la Fuente, 2008; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Tognini, 2008). As highlighted by Baharun and Zakaria (2017), “By resorting to L1, learners were able to have better comprehensibility of the input” (p.2086), understood what was required of them to complete the tasks, could make plans for task completion and thus, the participants were able to complete the tasks assigned to them.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study illustrates that there exists diverse and interesting purposes of L1 use during L2 lessons. Interestingly, these purposes are very much shaped and influenced by tasks types learners engage in. Thus, when using task-based lessons in teaching English, language practitioners need to be aware as not to overwhelm L2 English use. They should consider
allowing language tasks used during English language lessons to serve as a platform for learners to communicate meaningfully even with a splatter of the learners’ L1. With the help of their L1, learners may not need to worry about forms and structures of the L2 that may hamper meaningful interaction to occur but focus more on task completion. Their L2 fluency will hopefully be strengthened through the help of their L1 use as they become more confident and comfortable to use the L2. Thus, should teachers permit or forbid L1 use in the English language classroom? To conclude, permitting L1 use in the English language classroom is necessary to allow meaningful communication to occur during speaking lessons or communicative tasks.

The Ministry of Education (MOE), Malaysia, launched its blueprint “English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025”, which adopts the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (henceforth “CEFR”). This is a major decision made in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, henceforth MEB 2013-2025 as there are seven (7) – 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 10 – out of eleven (11) fundamental shifts in MEB that are relevant to English language education. The roadmap highlights the national agenda that sets the overall target for English language programme in the production of school leavers and graduates with the level of English proficiency they need to make themselves employable in the modern globalised world.
REFERENCES


