A Review of Some New Trends in Using L1 in the EFL Classroom
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Abstract

The place of the students' mother tongue or L1 in learning English as a foreign language has been the subject of much debate. In other words, there have been various shifts to and from the utilization of L1 in EFL classroom over the last decades. While advocates of the monolingual approach suggest that the FL should be the only language used in the classroom, which would foster FL learning, many researchers, teachers and learners see a role for L1 and support its use as a communication strategy and as an instructional tool.

In this paper, an attempt is made to review the new trends in this area of language teaching within the last years and determine to what extent L1 might be utilized to maximize EFL learning within English periods and lectures. In this context, a reference was made to some studies and research papers involving the use of Arabic in EFL classrooms at various teaching stages, particularly at the university level. In addition, a number of instructors are interviewed on their use of Arabic in their EFL classrooms for the same purpose. The responses showed that all of the instructors who are native speakers of English and 62.5% of non-native speakers of English felt that it was acceptable to use Arabic in EFL teaching.

Introduction

Nowadays, English is the common means of communication between the peoples of different nations. As a global language, its various areas have been largely investigated, especially that of EFL teaching and learning.

The use of L1 when teaching EFL is one of the major issues that have dominated the area of EFL acquisition for the last few decades. A number of studies have been conducted, which either support or oppose the use of L1 in EFL classroom. However, the large quantity of research, as well as the flourishing forms of bilingual education programs have paved the way to the development of a new area of language teaching methodology.

In fact, the general assumption that has prevailed for some time is that English ought to be learnt through English, and not by the use of L1, which has to be prohibited in the classroom. Many ELT professionals even wonder how students can truly appreciate target language exchanges if they are continually relying on their L1 (Bouangeune, 2009:186). According to Ellis (1984) several authors maintain that L1 has no essential role to play in EFL teaching and that too much L1 use might deprive learners of valuable input in the L2. However, the arguments against using L1 in EFL classroom have not provided sufficient evidence for avoiding L1, nor have they given clear reasons for banning L1. Consequently, several teaching methods and trends supporting the use of L1 as a helpful teaching and learning tool have emerged (Al-Nofaie, 2010); and many researchers and authors stress the value of using L1 and the positive role this plays in EFL teaching (Aurbach 1993; Mukattash 2003; Schweers 1999; Tang 2002). Thus, many researchers and teachers have started to re-evaluate the role of L1 in the EFL classroom and think of ways to best incorporate it into EFL teaching.
In this regard, some authors reflect upon the use of translation in the EFL classroom since translation activities may contribute to developing students' skills to achieve better understanding. They defend this practice of translation in the EFL context not as a means in itself, but as a strategy to make students better-equipped when they use EFL.

The reason why this paper focuses on using L1 in teaching new vocabulary and new constructions is related to the fact that they have a central role in EFL learning. Moreover, EFL learners need to have a considerable vocabulary size. Cook, 1991 (cited in Bouangeune, 2009: 187) holds that vocabulary learning is essential for the four language skills. As well, using L1 in the EFL classroom has a positive effect, according to Aurbach (1993), especially within the field of vocabulary acquisition.

**Historical Background**

Traditionally, the prevalence of Grammar-Translation method during the previous century led to students' inability to use EFL fluently after having studied it for long. Consequently, the use of L1 in the EFL classroom started to be seen as uncommunicative, boring, pointless and irrelevant (Harmer, 2001). In other words, this method was challenged for doing "virtually nothing to enhance students' communication ability in the language" (Brown, 2000:16).

Advocates of the Direct Method and the Audio-lingual Method later on emphasized banning the use of L1, and viewed L1 and FL as two different systems that should not be linked so as to avoid L1 interference. Within the same context, Krashen, 1981 (cited in AL-Nofaie, 2010:66) suggested that comprehensible input should provide opportunities for subconscious and implicit learning, which leads to achieving language competence. Therefore, the superiority of FL may indicate prohibiting L1 in the classroom. Other theorists and researchers believed that the focus on FL can enhance communication and activate both conscious and unconscious learning. They added that learners could understand the message even when they do not know the exact meaning of words or structures, which indicates that they do not need to grasp all the words they read or hear.

Subsequently, the total use of English to teach English as a foreign language was obligated, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, according to the communicative approaches, the use of L1 was still considered as undesirable (Mahmoud, 2006). This trend was enhanced by the cognitive psychology postulation that people acquire FL in a manner similar to the way they acquire their L1.

Admittedly, many people in the language teaching community still have reservations about using L1 in EFL classroom, objecting to it on the grounds that it limits exposure to the target language and keep students thinking in their L1.

These days, the taboo against using L1 in the classroom is breaking down, and the attitude to L1 and translation in language classes has witnessed a positive change following the recognition that some learners use the L1 as a communicative strategy to learn and use the FL (James 1998, Odlin 1989, Gill 2003, and Cook 2001). In fact, a relatively new teaching method which deliberately uses L1 in teaching EFL has appeared. It is the New Concurrent Method which requires teachers to balance the use of the L1 and the FL (Faltis, 1990). Here, referring to L1 might be possible in four areas: introducing concepts, reviewing a previous lesson, capturing learners' attention and praising them.
Moreover, as research continued, it has been obvious that in addition to negative language transfer, positive transfer also seems to be significant, which means that FL learners might benefit from being exposed to the similarities of the two languages.

**The Monolingual Approach**

Thus, two approaches have appeared with regard to using the L1 in EFL teaching: The Monolingual approach and the Bilingual approach. Many linguists object to using L1 in EFL teaching on the ground that it hinders learning. In other words, the Monolingual approach maintains that the foreign language should be the only medium of communication in the classroom. According to Sharma, (2006: 80), the rationale for using only the target language in the classroom is that “the more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it to begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it.”

In fact, the proponents of this approach suggest more than one reason for their attitude. First, using L1 may become a habit resorted to whenever any difficulties arise. Other than that, this use might be misleading sometimes owing to differences existing between the L1 and the FL. They add that when L1 is used, errors might emerge owing to negative L1 transfer. As an example, difficulties for Arab learners may be related sometimes to the different syntactic structures of sentences in Arabic and English. While Arabic has a V-S-O sentence structure, English generally follows the S-V-O pattern.

Krashen and Terrell (1983), advocates of this approach, argue that learners acquire FL following the same path they acquire their L1. Therefore, the use of L1 should be minimized. In their study of Arab learners of English in the Gulf region, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) concluded that the L1 should not usually be used in FL classrooms, since the aim of FL teaching is to approximate near-native competence. However, if there is a need for that, a limited and systematized use is recommended. To Macdonald, 1993 (cited in Sharma, 2006), switching to the L1 to explain what the teacher has said to learners is unnecessary and undermines the learning process.

What can be concluded from the above-mentioned studies and views is that it is better to teach English as a foreign language through the medium of English.

**The Bilingual Approach**

The Monolingual Approach has been criticized by researchers, teachers, and learners, who hold that L1 use is beneficial in EFL classes at more than one level. In other words, the use of the mother tongue is looked at as a common feature in EFL, and is a natural act which seems to make positive contribution to the learning process if used judiciously.

Researchers who advocate this approach such as Atkinson (1993); Macaro (2001); Deller and Rinvolucri (2002); Widdowson (2003); Aurbuch (1998) and Harbord (1992) argue that L1 represents a powerful source that can be used to enhance FL learning, but it should be used in a principled way.

Macaro (2001) argues that it is not only impractical to exclude the L1 from the classroom, but that it is also likely to deprive learners of an important tool for language learning. Similarly, Aurbuch, 1998 (cited in Sharma, 2006: 81) not only acknowledges the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom, but also identifies the following uses of it: language analysis, class management, presenting
grammar rules, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors and checking for comprehension. Within the same context, Harbord (1992) points out that many ELT teachers have tried to create English-only classrooms, but have found that they have failed to get the meaning across, leading to student incomprehension and resentment. According to Mukattash (2003: 224), using L1 in EFL teaching has been found to "facilitate both teaching and learning, systematize comprehension of EFL structures and items and hence leads to meaningful learning."

This trend, concurrent with the current recognition of the cognitive aspect of EFL learning, is best expressed by Chastain (1971:135):

"Meaningful learning takes place when the learners comprehend the material and can relate it to their present knowledge system."

In other words, instead of leaving the learner to struggle over how to relate L1 structures to EFL structures, it seems plausible to guide learners wherever guidance seems to be necessary.

Research on using the L1 and translation in teaching EFL

To investigate areas in which L1 is resorted to for teaching EFL and find out to what extent this practice might be possible and valid, the researchers have reviewed a number of relevant studies conducted in different parts of the world and at different times.

In his paper on using L1 in EFL classrooms, Aqel (2006) explores the instructors' and students' reactions to using Arabic language in teaching EFL in the Department of English and Modern European languages at the University of Qatar. As regards responses to the questionnaires prepared for this purpose, it was found that all of the instructors who are native speakers of English and 62.5% of non-native speakers of English felt that it was acceptable to use Arabic in EFL teaching. As for students' reactions, it was found that 42.85% of freshmen; 54.23% of sophomores; 57.64% of juniors and 61.53% of senior students favored the use of Arabic. The paper recommends a judicious use of Arabic in EFL teaching and when it is the shortest possible way to make learners understand the required points.

Cianflone (2009), in his research on L1 use in English courses at the University of Messina in Italy, finds that the interviewed students and teachers seem favorable to L1 use in terms of explanation of grammar, vocabulary items, difficult concepts and for general comprehension. He concludes that students seem to prefer L1 use and teachers subscribe to using L1 judiciously. Such use, being at the university level, may save time and increase students' motivation.

In a study involving the use of mother tongue in an EFL classroom setting of Chitwan high school students in Nepal, Sharma (2006) uses classroom observation of four teachers and questionnaire responses of one hundred students and twenty high school English teachers. Many respondents report that they prefer occasional use of L1 in the EFL classroom for many reasons: to clarify the meaning of difficult words, to explain grammar rules, to establish close relationship between students and teachers and so on. L1 use ought to be judicious and this is justified since it reveals that L1 helps students learn English more effectively, saves time and makes students feel easy and comfortable when they are provided with L1 equivalents.

Surveying students and teachers at his Puerto Rican university with regard to using their mother tongue (i.e. Spanish) within their English classes, Schweers (
1999:6) finds that 88.7 percent of the students and 100 percent of the teachers feel that Spanish should be used in their English classes. Eighty-six percent feel that their L1 should be used to explain difficult concepts and 67 percent say that their L1 helps them to feel less lost. He concludes by encouraging teachers to employ L1 so as to promote dynamism in the classroom, provide a sense of security and activate learners’ experiences.

In their study, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) attempt to investigate and evaluate the use of the mother tongue in teaching EFL. A field study is conducted in which teachers, supervisors and students are asked about their attitudes to the issue, their actual use of the mother tongue, and about the situations and purposes for which they use it. After the findings have been stated, some recommendations are made for a limited, systematized and profitable use of the mother tongue in the SL classroom in a formal educational system.

The last study to be reviewed here is a case study conducted by Bouangeune (2009) at the National University of Laos. The study makes an important contribution to EFL teaching, particularly in the area of vocabulary for students with a lower proficiency level. It shows the effectiveness of using L1 in teaching vocabulary through translation exercises and dictation. The findings indicate that the experimental group achieved better performance in both vocabulary in direct translation and vocabulary in context. In fact, the results could provide empirical support for the application of L1 in the FL classroom. The researcher concludes that "in order to prevent the misunderstanding of the meaning of the new word, teachers should provide clear, simple, and brief explanations of meaning, especially in the learners' first language" (Bouangeune,2009:189).

Commenting on these studies and similar ones, Al-Nofaie (2010:69) notices that many teachers use L1 to explain grammar and new vocabulary. The findings give support to the assumption that advanced learners manifest good progress when L1 is used. The learners' level and the teachers' professional experience also affect the degree to which teachers resort to L1.

It seems important in this context to distinguish between the teaching of translation as a vocational skill and the use of the L1 in the EFL teaching situation as an aid to learning. This is best expressed by Mukattash (2003: 224) who holds that "Translation can be used as a teaching technique particularly in those areas where there is marked discrepancy between L1 and EFL system" He adds that translation can also be used in explicating English structures that are likely to be confused with each other, as well as disambiguating certain occurrences of ambiguous sentences, such as (He stopped to drink. Or He stopped drinking Or She found the book which she lost in the library).

The advantages of using the L1 in EFL classrooms

First, it is essential to understand here that using L1 is not taken for granted, but it is resorted to when there is a need for it such as explaining difficult terms and some grammatical points with some sort of comparison to Arabic counterparts. As for the amount of L1 used for this purpose, the time, the place and the manner, it may have to do with how successful the teacher is in conveying the message and when he needs to clarify certain constructions, as well as the different learner styles and abilities.

Benefits of using L1 in EFL classroom and the reasons behind that are proposed by some researchers. Atkinson, 1987 (cited in Bouangeune, 2009:186) states that using
L1 might be useful for three reasons: Translation is preferred by learners, and it helps them to reveal their feelings. As well, building on differences between the L1 and the FL through translation helps to avoid negative transfer. Furthermore, it is a valuable technique for exploiting class time. He then identifies the following uses for L1, which include: checking comprehension, giving instructions, enhancing cooperation among learners and improving presentation and reinforcement.

Harbord (1992) supports the previous reasons for employing L1 and adds that L1 can enhance and keep the flow of communication. Butzkamm (2003), summarizes the principles and advantages of using L1 as follows:

- L1 use gives a sense of security and helps learners to be stress-free.
- L1 is the greatest asset people bring to the task of FL learning.
- A foreign language friendly atmosphere is best achieved through selective use of the L1.
- The use of the L1 saves learners from a feeling of frustration they might have within their FL learning.
- L1 techniques allow teachers to use richer and more authentic texts, which means more comprehensible input and faster acquisition.
- All newly-acquired FL items have to sink roots in our minds which are eventually deep enough for the items to function independently of the L1.

Some guidelines for teachers' beneficial use of L1 are demonstrated by Sharma (2006). He suggests that L1 might be used for translating new language, chatting with learners, giving instructions, providing feedback and error correction and checking learners' comprehension.

Thus, appropriate use of L1 in EFL classes involves saving class time. Instead of going through a long explanations in the target language, it would sometimes be easier and more efficient to give a translation of a vocabulary item or an explanation of a grammar point.

More than that, a comparison of English and the mother tongue might be an enriching experience. In other words, when similarities and differences of both languages are discovered, the target language learning is enhanced.

The advantages might involve cultural aspects, as well. That is to say, cultural similarities and differences may be highlighted to help learners accept differences while preserve their cultural identity, which could be done through many activities including the use of L1.

Researchers have also stressed other uses and advantages of L1. These include managing of the class, giving instructions for teaching and testing activities, conveying meaning through giving the L1 equivalence of FL items and sentences, explaining grammar, and dealing with errors.

To sum up this section, it might be appropriate to quote the following words of Deller (2002:3): The mother tongue taboo has been with us for a long time, but fortunately now things seem to be changing. I believe that many teachers have continued to use the mother tongue because it is both necessary and effective."
Some English instructors' views on the use of L1 in EFL teaching

The researchers have interviewed five English instructors with regard to their use of Arabic in their EFL classrooms in order to identify their attitudes and views over this controversial issue. The two questions raised are: To what extent do you use Arabic in your EFL classes? and What are your own views on this issue? It is assumed that their tentative views might serve further research on this problem in the future.

Their views are expressed in the appendix at the end of this paper.

Recommendations

In the light of the research and studies that have been conducted on this issue, the following suggestions might be relevant in this context:

- It is advised that L1 be used in a limited manner, at appropriate times and in appropriate places. Following Atkinson (1987), the researchers think that teachers should use English where possible and the L1 where necessary, which means that the L1 is a consciously chosen option with an auxiliary role.

- It is important for teachers to utilize translation for making students see and become aware of the similarities and differences between the L1 and the FL, since with such knowledge, they will acquire the FL easier.

- It is necessary to establish parameters to build a framework of principled use by comparing results from different countries and from different learning situations.

- As for reaching a balance of L1 use, it is advised to consider the four factors Harmer (2001:132) mentions in this context: the student's previous experience, the student's level, the stage of the course and the stage of the individual lesson.

- Using L1 should not deprive students of FL exposure.

- Tertiary EFL institutions need to accept the need for and adopt a more realistic policy for L1 use.

- Finally, the researchers recommend that further research be conducted on this area of EFL teaching.

Conclusion

In fact, there is no rule that you should never use L1 in English learning, nor is there any excuse for using L1 most of the time.

To conclude, the researchers have found these words of Butzkamm (2003:38) most appropriate:

"We should finally free ourselves of a fundamental misconception and re-establish the more than 200-year-old productive alliance between the mother tongue and the foreign language."

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Appendix

**Views on the use of L1 in EFL classrooms**

**Instructor One:**

"The mother tongue can be used with economy, i.e. only when necessary and appropriate. To maintain some degree of interest in the classroom, the teacher is bound to use the mother tongue especially when the subject is new and the vocabulary is also new. When the teacher needs to explain abstract words, he can use the mother tongue because it saves the class time. When the teacher is setting a group work task, handwriting demonstrations and explanation of some exercises, he can use the mother tongue. When clarifying situations on teaching listening comprehension, the teacher may use the mother tongue" (Dr. Munther Zyoud / Al-Quds Open University)

**Instructor Two:**

"To enrich students' understanding of communicative English, I make sure that the language of instruction in my classes is English. However, bilingual instructors, I think, should switch, now and then, to Arabic to explain certain idiomatic expressions to facilitate understanding of the lesson. I sometimes refer to Arabic to elaborate on social and cultural aspects that would otherwise be hard to explain, but in Arabic. When teaching the Tragedy of Macbeth for my students, I found it really helpful to translate certain idioms and proverbs in Arabic to catch students' attention to make them feel the text and live the situation. " Bloody instructions when being taught
should plague the inventor" This saying in Macbeth is best explained by an Arabic proverb: "Jaja hafrat and ras ha afrat." (Mr. Usama Jarrar/ Arab-American University)

Instructor Three:
"Language teachers have been debating whether or not to use the students' L1 in the L2 teaching. The debate over whether English language classrooms should include or exclude students' native language has been a controversial issue. A teacher should know when and how to use the mother tongue. It should be used only when it is necessary, mainly in introducing abstract words, culture-specific expressions, emergency cases and checking understanding instructions. In brief, teachers should be aware of the benefits and dangers of using L1 in their classes." (Mr. Riyad Ahmad/ English Supervisor / Directorate of education)

Instructor Four:
"According to me, if not exclusive, use of the target language has long been considered an important principle of second language instruction. I completely agree with using or learning just the L2 or the FL in the class. Students should get accustomed to the target language as much as possible. It gets multi-functional effects in long term. On the other hand, I have been hearing about usage of some home language or L1 to make pupils feel more comfortable and open to learning, but I do not agree with that, somehow; I am not sure of that; students have to be accustomed to learn the FL without explanations that use the L1. In some exceptional and strict cases, teachers could use the home language for clarifying some complex points, some difficult meanings of some vocabulary, but not excessively and not to advanced classes. Students must not be familiar to that, strictly they must learn pure L2 and think how to understand and speak by L2 itself without interference of L1 in that." (Dr. Muneer fathi / Al-Quds Open university)

Instructor Five:
"Many English instructors completely reject the use of L1 (Arabic) in teaching L2 (English) in classrooms. I believe that L1 should be allowed to be used in teaching L2, but to a very limited extent. The use of L1 is sometimes indispensable since it fulfills certain functions and purposes for the learners. In addition to that fact, L1 is part of the culture of the learners' learning environment. Instructors at schools or universities should, however, keep in mind that the excess use of L1 in teaching L2 does not lead to much language competence. Finally, it can be said that despite the various training courses English teachers have attended on this hot issue of using L1 in L2 teaching, teachers tend to use L1 dominantly, especially when they are not being observed." (Mr. Tareq Alawneh/ Vice-director of Education and part-time English supervisor)