Sensible use of L1 promotes EFL learning

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Abstract

For a long time the first language (L1) use has been banned from the second language (L2) classroom. L1 is commonly supposed to be an impediment to learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). This study was an attempt to draw attention to this void by building a bridge between translation as a learning strategy and teaching EFL. Quasi-experimental design was used to study 44 female and 35 male Iranian undergraduate students at the University of Bojnord (UB). Two classes of non-English major students were assigned different tasks from a collection of 50 episodes of The Flatmates from the BBC's learning English website. Scores of the test were collected before and after the treatment. The reliability of the test was estimated at 0.74 through KR-21 formula. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the possible differences between the means of the experimental and control groups. The findings of the study confirmed the effectiveness of using translation implying that students' learning will be facilitated if this strategy is applied. However, over-reliance on translation is as detrimental as its complete exclusion, that is, the effectiveness or infectiveness of this strategy depends on its judicious use.

Keywords: *Translation, learning strategy, language Teaching, EFL learning, L1, L2*

Introduction

The use of L1 in the L2 classroom was popular in the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) era (Howatt, 1984), but it was banned by Direct Method (DM) and Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) or dissuaded by the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach (Cook, 2001a; 2001b). Despite the dominance of the monolingual orthodoxy for a long time, the EFL/ESL professionals recently argue that the L1 use has some advantages (Cole, 1998). Atkinson (1987) contends that a limited and constructive use of L1 in the L2 classroom deserves considerable attention for three reasons: 1) it is a learner preferred strategy, 2) it is a humanistic approach, and 3) it leads to an efficient use of time.

Although no theories support the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, it is still used throughout the world (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). This has always been of much concern to applied linguistics and EFL teachers (Gorjian, Pazhakh, & Naghizadeh, 2012). There are still arguments for and against the L1 use, so both teachers and learners need to be informed about the reason, time, and amount of its use in the classroom. Since it is a common belief that the imprudent use of L1 could have negative impacts on the L2 learning, this study investigates the judicious use of L1 as a learning strategy in the EFL classroom. More specifically, it tries to answer the following question:

Does sensible use of L1 promote EFL learning?

Review of literature

Language teaching methods have undergone radical changes in terms of arguments for and against the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. Most of the well-established EFL teaching methods ignore the role of L1. They consequently undermine the potential advantages of incorporating translation into EFL teaching. According to Malmkjaer (1998), the objections to translation in language teaching date back to the nineteenth century. She argues that the GTM has been questioned based on the notion that speech is primary. She refers to the Berlitz method in which translation is believed to be detrimental to speaking and should be prevented under any circumstances.

The appearance of the DM over a hundred years ago contributed greatly to the exclusion of L1 from the EFL classroom (Pennycook, 1994; Harbord, 1992). Teachers who were caught using L1 in the classroom were supposed to be doing something wrong (Phillipson, 1992). Such an attitude inherently implied that the native-speaking teacher, due to political and economic reasons in the global EFL field (Pennycook, 1994), could control all the employment opportunities. The teachers who went abroad during the colonial teaching period (Phillipson, 1992) and British colonial policies helped the monolingual tenet to evolve (Hawks, 2001). For those who lived in the British colonies and those who moved to America, English meant a better life. The dominance of English in the world has been labeled Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, 1992).

The strong anti-translation bias in EFL teaching methodology is nowadays out of date and easily countered. Some authors agree that presentation of the meaning of some contextualized items is necessary because if certain differences are not explained, they will go unnoticed (Nunan & Lamb 1996; Ellis 1992; Harmer 1991). According to Weschler (1997), English-only policy is the result of the blind acceptance of certain theories, which serves the native teachers' interests. There is strong evidence that students prefer teachers who comprehend their students' L1 (Briggs, 2001). Translation may have been abandoned in ESL situations but it has displayed remarkable resilience in EFL contexts like Iran. Raeiszadeh, et al. (2012) found that Iranian students use translation tasks to learn vocabulary, idioms, expressions, and all language skills. According to Gorjian, et al. (2012), translation also helps them understand grammar rules and teachers' instructions.

Since translation has been a preferred language practice technique in EFL settings for years, it undoubtedly has a place in the EFL classroom. But the use of translation has always been a controversial pedagogical issue in Iranian EFL classes. The dynamics of EFL and ESL vary. ESL students in English speaking countries are immersed in English outside the classroom, while EFL students in non-English speaking countries are exposed to English only in the classroom. This research was carried out to question the above-mentioned anti-translation position by problematizing the exclusion of L1 from the L2 classroom. In this study, the term "translation" is loosely used as a learning strategy to refer to innovative ways of incorporating L1 into the EFL classroom as a last resort in collaborative tasks. The term "translation" and "L1" are almost interchangeable in this study. L1 is employed judiciously and sensible use of translation is seen as a constructive EFL pedagogical tool for students to comprehend difficult concepts.

Although some scholars consider translation as a legitimate pedagogical tool in EFL contexts which is worthy of rehabilitation (Ur 1996; Bowen & Marks 1994; Ellis 1992; Harmer 1991; Widdowson 1978), few of them provide any methodological advice or pedagogical practice. The focus has often been on translation theories. However, some scholars have examined the link between language teaching and translation. They have dealt with translation as a learning scaffolding and pedagogical tool (Eadie 1999; Schweers, 1999; Urgese 1989; Nadstroga 1988; Ulrych 1986; Edge 1986; Atkinson 1993; Duff 1989). This study was an attempt to explore the pedagogical issue of L1 use in the classroom and has nothing to do with GTM. That is why the following literature review is only confined to strictly relevant studies about the dynamics of incorporating translation judiciously in EFL classes in the light of insights from new psychological perspectives on language learning and language teaching theories.

Auerbach (1993) states that whether or not to use L1 is a shared decision to be made by the teacher and the students in the EFL classroom but there is currently an all or nothing approach to it. According to Mouhanna (2009), the use of L1 in the EFL classroom is commonly perceived to be a barrier to learning. However, it reduces anxiety (Atkinson 1993), has a scaffolding role (Anton & DiCamilla 1998), and cognitively supports students (Storch and Wigglesworth 2003). According to Pennycook (2001), one of the basic principles of Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL) is to problematize unquestioned

assumptions. Phillipson (1992) contends that the EFL profession has failed to question the following fallacies in the EFL world:

1. English is best taught monolingually.

2. The ideal teacher of English is a native like speaker.

3. The earlier English is taught, the better the results.

4. The more English is taught, the better the results.

5. If other languages are used much, standards of English will drop. (p.185)

The first constituent and relatively unquestioned fallacy underlying the EFL profession is the monolingual fallacy. This tenet has underpinned the English only policy. It is problematized by critical theory which underlies a reliable theoretical framework for this study. According to Pennycook (2001), in CAL preferred futures are emphasized and nothing can be taken for granted. By problematizing the monolingual policy, this study focuses on translation as a learning strategy where L1 is considered as a valuable tool rather than a barrier to learning in the EFL classroom. Although this study concentrates on the first tenet which is obviously the most significant one, it is difficult to separate it from the other four principles because they are closely interrelated.

According to Phillipson (1992), this fallacy is closely associated with the misconception that native teachers are superior to their non- native counterparts. This fallacy is somehow supported by Krashen's (1983) Monitor model in which L1 and L2 are believed to be acquired through a natural approach and immense exposure to the L2 or limited use of L1 is emphasized. However, Cook (2001b) suggests the limited use of L1 in collaborative learning.

According to Auerbach (1993), the rationale used to justify this fallacy is not pedagogically sound based on evidence from research and practice. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) believe that "teachers should not prohibit the use of some L1 altogether in group and pair work but should acknowledge that the use of the L1 may be a normal psychological process that allows learners to initiate and sustain verbal interaction" (p.768). According to Scott and De La Fuente (2008), the use of L1 for consciousness raising tasks "may reduce cognitive overload, sustain collaborative interaction, foster the development of metalinguistic terminology" (p.111). Mouhanna (2009) found that lower level students have a higher demand for L1 use indicating that a sensible incorporation of this pedagogical tool for learning at the lower levels is very helpful. Mai- ling (1996) suggests a sensible use of L1 in the EFL classroom and argues that "Speaking English in class with little regard to whether the students understand or not will result only in meaningless exposure" (p. 98).

Since learner-centered language teaching is increasingly growing, anything that helps students in their own ways is an asset. So, what is of assistance to them should be investigated to help them. Translation as a learning strategy is likely to be favored especially by analytically oriented students. The purpose is not to train professionals. It is used as a means to an end, not an end to be achieved at all. This study examined whether the judicious use of L1 in the EFL classroom hinders or facilitates learning.

Method

Research design

Since random assignment was not possible, the nonequivalent group, pretest-posttest design was employed in this study. That is, the subjects were tested in existing groups. The following diagram summarizes the quasi-experimental design in which the dotted line represents non-equivalent groups. Both groups are measured before and after the treatment. Only one group receives the treatment. In this diagram GA and GB stand for experimental and control groups respectively. T1 and T3 stand for the tests before applying the treatment. T2 and T4 stand for the tests after the treatment and X stands for treatment.

GA   T1   X   T2

GB   T3   T4

The research question and the corresponding hypothesis in this study are as follows:

Does sensible use of L1 promote EFL learning?

Ho: Sensible use of L1 has no positive effect on promoting EFL learning.

Subjects

Originally eighty three Iranian undergraduate EFL students participated in this study. Four of them dropped the experiment for different reasons. Of the 79 remaining subjects, 44 were female and 35 were male. All of them were non-English major students at the UB. They all spoke Persian as their first language. They all had studied English for 7 years at secondary school. Two intact classes of first-semester students from different fields of study, who had taken the general English course, were used for the experiment. There were 40 students in GA and 39 in GB. GA was considered as the experimental group and GB as control group. A pre-test was administered to capture the initial differences between the two groups before starting the treatment. Since the general English course is compulsory, there was no attrition of the 79 subjects during the treatment and for the post-test. However, 13 students were absent for one or two sessions from both groups during the experiment. The main limitation turned out to be the large number of students in each class. It was too difficult to find the time to actively involve all the subjects. A more positive, collaborative, and supportive classroom climate can be created if the number of subjects is reduced to less than twenty.

Instruments

A collection of 50 episodes of The Flatmates from the BBC's learning English website dealing with daily events in the lives of the same group of characters was used for the treatment. The subjects followed the adventures of the main characters in different real life situations to improve their English. The Flatmates is a conversational listening and speaking series for learners of English at the intermediate and advanced levels. Audio support materials provided the students with the tools needed to improve their real-life English. Its step-by-step approach allowed the learners to develop both speaking and listening skills by focusing on common communication situations. Organized around a variety of themes, the series built confidence through conversations based on everyday situations.

A 50-item achievement pre-test was developed by the researcher. The items mainly included difficult words, expressions, idioms, and proverbs. The subjects were provided with 20 words to answer the first 20 items by filling in the blanks. They were required to fill in the blanks of 10 additional items in the second part using their own knowledge. They were also asked to choose the correct answer for the 20 multiple-choice items from the third part of the test. All of the 50 items were equally weighted, that is, the subjects received one point for each correct answer and no negative point for the wrong answer. The pre-test was administered to capture the initial differences between the two groups before commencing the main study. Since the time interval between the pre-test and post-test was long enough (about 10 weeks), the same pre-test, with some changes in its arrangement, was administered to the subjects as the post-test. As to the pilot test, a class similar to those in this study responded to the items and helped the researcher establish the reliability of the test, which was estimated 0.74 through KR-21 formula.

Procedure

This experiment was conducted at the UB, in Iran. It was implemented in three phases: pre-test, treatment, and post-test. The independent variable was the impact of sensible use of L1 and the dependent variable was undergraduate students' EFL learning. After administering the pre-test to capture the initial differences between the two groups in the first session, the experiment was carried out in 10 sessions. Each group attended the class for a period of one and a half hours. The subjects were not informed of the experiment because the prior knowledge could influence the results. The subjects in the experimental group (EG) were told that Persian would be allowed when necessary. The teacher (researcher) would not be the initiator in Persian but would use it if the subjects prompted him. Since less proficient students required more L1 support, the researcher made them aware of the fact that over-reliance on translation would be a hindrance to their learning. The subjects in the control

group (CG) were not allowed to use L1. They had to define their problems in English only. The teacher helped them only by providing plenty of demonstrations, explanations, and examples. They were expected to deduce the meaning from the context. The subjects in both groups had to do pair or group work so that they could have a chance to discuss, test and compare their ideas. Fifty episodes were taught to the two groups. An English-only policy was used with the CG and using Persian when necessary with the EG. One week after the last session, the participants sat for the post-test. The treatment is described below.

After the pretest was administered to each group on the first day, the training session was held from October 1 to December 13, 2012. Each of the one and a half hour classes met one day a week. Since it was a three-unit course, one extra session was held every other week except for holidays. The researcher began each session by reading each episode aloud. He tried to create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere by keeping eye contact with the subjects and asking them questions. Then, the students listened to the CD version of the episode, without any discussion, which allowed them to become completely absorbed in it. They listened far more intently when it was read by the researcher himself. Each student was provided with a pocket dictionary at each session. The subjects worked collaboratively to complete their tasks (reading and understanding the episode).

Six elements of cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1999; 1995; 1989) were taken into account in this study. Positive interdependence is the first element. Here a score for one learner is associated with scores for the other learners. Equal participation, the second element, means that no learner is allowed to socially or academically dominate a group. Individual accountability is the third element. This means the member is held accountable by the group for his or her contribution, participation, and learning. Simultaneous interaction is the fourth element; group members meet face to face to complete their assignments and improve each other's success. Interpersonal skill is the fifth element in which learners have to engage in teamwork to achieve mutual goals. Group processing is the last element. This explains what actions need to be continued or changed.

After listening to the CD version of each episode, the subjects had a few minutes to get prepared. They were expected to remember all the details. After discussing the episodes in their group, they had the opportunity to act them out in front of the class while their classmates were just listening. The researcher used hints to help the subjects act out each episode. Their group members were allowed to help them if needed, but they had already been asked to give them enough time to think on their own before helping. They received feedback in the form of appreciations and suggestions. The only difference between the two groups was whether or not to use the mother tongue. L1 (Persian) in the EG class was allowed when necessary as a last resort but translation in the CG class was completely banned at any cost. The teacher used Persian to help explain things when they were not clear in the EG class. English was the predominant language in the classroom. In the CG class Persian was not allowed even in student-to-student exchanges. Although it was difficult to rigidly enforce the rule, the students were encouraged to observe it. They were told that it was in their best interest. The Monolingual Approach was enforced in the CG class as strictly as possible which caused a little resentment at first, but afterwards the subjects almost accepted it. Sometimes students would lapse into Persian and the teacher was unable to prevent it.

The researcher took important steps to decrease or control the influence of extraneous variables as much as possible. To see the statistical effect of the treatment, the same 50-item test was administered to both groups as the post-test one week after the last session. The pre-test and post-test were identical, but the arrangement of the items was different in the post-test. Since there was an interval of almost two and a half months between the two tests, the post-test was unlikely to be influenced by the subjects' memory. To control the John Henry Effect, arrangements were made so that the subjects in the control group could not find out they were in competition with those in the experimental group.

Statistical analysis and results

To answer the research question (Does sensible use of L1 promote EFL learning?), the raw scores taken from the pre-test and post-test were submitted to the computer software Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS version 18), using a t-test. Independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the possible differences between the means of the two groups based on the gain scores from the post-test. The calculation indicated that the sensible use of L1 had a significant effect on the subjects' EFL learning.

The following tables indicate the summary of the t-tests.

Table 1. *The Independent Samples t-test for the experimental and control groups (pre-test)*

Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	df	t	Sig.
Experimental	41	17.78	2.44	81	- 0.64	0.51
Control	42	18.11	1.31			

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores of the two groups before the treatment. First, the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was checked. If the Levene's Test is significant (p. < .05), the two variances are significantly different. If it is not significant (p. > .05), the two variances are approximately equal. In this case, since the Levene's test was not significant (p. = 0.65 > 0.05), it was assumed that the variances were approximately equal. Next, the results of the t-test were checked. If the variances are approximately equal, the top line is read. If the variances are not equal, the bottom line is read. Based on the results of the Levene's test, it was known that the two groups had approximately equal variances on the dependent variable, so the top line was read.

As indicated in Table 1, there was no significant difference between the EG *(M = 17.78, SD = 2.44)* and the CG *[M = 18.11, SD = 1.31; t (64) = 0.51, p. > .05]* before the treatment.

Table 2. *The Independent Samples t-test for the experimental and control groups (post-test)*

Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	df	t	Sig.
Experimental	40	38.30	5.79	68.24	5.83	0.000*
Control	39	31.84	3.87			

*Sig. $p < .05$

The second independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores of the two groups after the treatment (post-test). First, the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was checked. Since the Levene's test was significant (p. = 0.007 < .05), it was assumed that the variances were not equal. Next, the results of the t-test were checked. Based on the results of the Levene's test, it was known that the two groups did not have equal variances on the dependent variable, so the bottom line was read.

As indicated in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the gain scores for the EG (*M* = 38.30, *SD* = 5.79) and the gain scores for the CG [*M* = 31.84, *SD* = 3.87; *t* (5.83) = 0.000, *p* < .*05*]. This final result shows that the mean score of the EG after the treatment is more than the CG. Since there is a significant difference between the means of the two groups, the null hypothesis (Sensible use of L1 has no positive effect on promoting EFL learning) is rejected. Therefore, the effectiveness of sensible use of L1 is supported.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study two first-semester university classes were compared. One class was not allowed to use of L1 in the classroom but the other was allowed to use it judiciously if necessary. The two classes were similar in many respects. The students showed a significantly higher improvement in the class where Persian was utilized to a limited extent. The main limitation turned out to be the large number of students in each class. It was too difficult to find the time to actively involve the subjects. A more positive, collaborative, and supportive classroom climate can be created if the number of subjects is reduced to less than twenty. The second limitation was comparing the improvement of classes based on the reliance on test scores which are not always the best indicators of learning. However, primary data were collected by conducting a pre-test, treatment, and a post-test. The result of the independent samples t-test analysis from the post-test administration indicated that the EG had a better performance (a higher test score) than the CG.

Although the use of L1 in the EFL classroom is commonly perceived to be a barrier to learning (Mouhanna, 2009), this perception is out of date and easily countered. The findings of this study confirm the effectiveness of using L1 when necessary but not as a time-saving device. These findings

are in line with the previous studies (Eadie 1999; Schweers, 1999; Urgese 1989; Nadstroga 1988; Ulrych 1986; Edge 1986; Atkinson 1993; Duff 1989), which advise the use of L1 in a limited manner, at appropriate times, and in appropriate places. The learners' previous experience, their level, the course stage, and the individual lesson stage should be taken into account to reach a balance of L1 use (Harmer, 2001).

Since this seems to have facilitated the process of EFL learning, it is suggested that this strategy be used to reinforce EFL students' performance. This finding entails an important implication for those who over-use L1 which is believed to be detrimental to the students' learning. That is, judicious use of the L1 should be limited so that it will not deprive students of L2 exposure. Furthermore, it has an implication for those who completely banish it. English-only policy may lead to students' anxiety and resentment as appeared in this study. Using L1 as a learning strategy with an auxiliary role can be a more realistic policy for L1 use. That is, L2 should be used where possible and L1 where necessary (Atkinson, 1987) and EFL students should not be deprive of L2 at any cost. As pointed out by Butzkamm (2003:38): "We should finally free ourselves of a fundamental misconception and reestablish the more than 200-year-old productive alliance between the mother tongue and the foreign language."

Since random assignment of the subjects was not possible in this study, the results need to be interpreted more cautiously. More research on other innovative ways of incorporating L1 into the EFL classroom is in order.

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