

L1 use and implications in English language teaching in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The debate on the role of the first language (L1) use in foreign language classrooms has not reached a conclusive outcome and remained a controversial topic. A number of studies have been carried out across the globe in order to analyse the role of L1 in EFL classrooms. Some experts believe that the use of L1 would seriously narrow down the scope for the target language input and output therefore it should be abandoned, while others see a pedagogical value in L1 use in language classrooms. In Vietnam, there seems to be a gap regarding the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. The present study attempts to fill this gap by examining how Vietnamese teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) use Vietnamese (L1) in their classrooms.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Monolingual Policy

The common opinion that English is more superior compared to other languages (Pennycook, 1994) advocates the application of L2 in the teaching of L2. Cook (2001) in Miles (2004) highlighted several key reasons for the Monolingual Approach as follows:

1. L2 learning should model that of an L1 (through maximum exposure to the L2).
2. Effective learning involves the clear and concise distinction between L1 and L2.
3. Learners should be made to appreciate the significance of the L2 via its recurring use.

Several educators are firmly in the opinion that L2 acquisition is akin to that of L1, which strongly believes that exposure is the key to effective acquisition (Ellis, 2008). A child acquires his/her mother-tongue by listening and replicating what the people around them say, the exposure is critical in the development of their linguistic capacity. The Natural Approach advocates the use of L2 to teach L2 and also states that adults will acquire a language in the same way as a child would.

Translation between L1 and L2 is deemed risky as it gives the impression that there is a direct translation between the languages, which as a matter of fact is not necessarily the case (Pacek, 2003). As Cook mentioned, that the exclusive use of L2 in the classroom can possibly help

express its significance (Pachler &Field, 2001). Supporters of L2-only lessons also believes that the classroom use of L1 is not in tandem with SLA theories, which advocates the customized learning and discussion in L2 as a method of learning (Polio, 1994).This concept forms the basis of some of today’s globally acknowledged teaching methods.

1.2 Bilingual Policy

In Today’s teaching environment, it has almost become a norm for EFL teachers to utilise the students’ L1 as a medium of instruction as well as a mode of interaction in their respective classrooms (Nazary, 2008). Brown (2000) believes that “L1 can be a contributing factor instead of an interfering factor”, and Schweers (1999) encourages teachers to integrate L1 into lessons to better leverage the classroom dynamics. Brown (2000) also feels that “warming up with L1 generates a sense of security and assurance, allowing the learners to express themselves freely”. Cook (2001) listed three critical situations where L1 could be applied constructively in the classroom: teachers may use L1 to put across the meaning of words or sentences, teachers can use L1 for classroom management purposes such as organizing tasks, maintaining discipline or communicating with individual students, finally students can utilise L1 in their group work learning activities to support each other.

1.3 Purpose of the study and research questions

The inclusion of the mother-tongue in EFL teaching until today remains a hot topic. Some experts feel it is helpful, while others find it to be counter-productive (Brown, 2000). Nonetheless, the research findings haven’t been entirely convincing either way. A number of studies have been carried out across the globe in order to analyse the role of L1 in EFL classrooms, but only few were conducted in Vietnam. This study aims to investigate how Vietnamese EFL teachers use their first language in classrooms. The key research questions in the study are:

1. What are the functions of L1 as used by Vietnamese EFL teachers for students of pre-intermediate levels?
2. What are Vietnamese EFL teachers’ perspectives on the use of L1 in foreign language classrooms?

A qualitative method was chosen to conduct this study in which observation and interviews were used as instruments to collect data. Three teachers from a language institution in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam participated in this study.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Studies on functions of L1 use in the EFL classrooms

While the majority of researchers believe that the use of L1 in the classroom brings many benefits (Cook, 2001; Folse, 2004; Macaro, 2005; Moore, 1996; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002; VanLier, 1995), there are others who feel that the optimal use of L2 is very important in attaining higher level of L2 proficiency. Duff and Polio (1990) and Polio and Duff, (1994) made some studies on the several teachers at college level and revealed that the factors influencing the amount of L1 and L2 is influenced by the lesson content, language origin, education policies, guidelines and the level training.

The teachers’ proficiency in L1 wasn’t a contributing factor to the quantum of L1 and L2 used

(e.g. a non-native L2 teacher used 95.6% of L2, while a native L2 teacher used a mere 9.5% of L2). The years of teaching experience also did not seem to affect the quantity of L1 utilized. In their 1994 study, Polio and Duff highlighted some additional factors such as: classroom administrative vocabulary (e.g. tests, review session), grammar instruction, classroom management, empathy/solidarity, the practice of English (as an L2 for them), and lack of vocabulary and comprehension.

Castellotti (2001) observed that teachers often have their own valid reasons pertaining to their L1 use depending primarily on their learners' L2 competency, the class activities and curriculum. L1 in this study served three major functions: it can be used for 1) communicative and pedagogical organization and management; 2) guidance, facilitation of exchanges, comprehension check and assessment; 3) metalinguistic explanations and reflections with learners...

Forman (2012) explored fresh ways of describing the major pedagogic functions of teacher-talk across both L1 and L2 in an EFL context where exposure to the L1 is often confined to the language classroom. His study is conducted in the English Department of a medium-size provincial Thai university. There were nine teachers in the study: five were female, four male. Eight of them were native Thais while one was Anglo-Australian. A total of 19 hours' classroom observation data and interviews were collected for analysis. The six pedagogic functions established are as follows: animating, translating, explaining, creating, and prompting & dialoguing.

The findings of Istiqlaliah's research (2012) drew some helpful functions of L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) perceived by teachers and students as follows: to explain grammar, to explain difficult vocabulary items, to check students' comprehension, to make jokes, to give suggestions to the students to learn more effectively, and to give complex classroom instruction. He also stated that there was significant relation between L1 and classroom interaction.

In a Vietnamese context, Anh's study (2010) investigated the attitudes of Vietnamese university teachers toward the use of Vietnamese in ELT. A total of 12 teachers from three universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam participated in this study. The data was collected via questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The results highlight that Vietnamese L1 was useful in situations such as: "explaining grammatical points", "explaining new words", "checking for understanding". One of the teacher also mentioned in her interview that making jokes may create a less-stressed learning environment and help them learn better.

2.1 Sali's study on the teachers' use of L1

Sali's research (2013) is considered among the most recent which investigated the teachers' utilisation of L1. Sali concluded that L1 in all the three teachers' classroom discourse had three key functions: The teacher either used L1 to communicate the content of the lesson (Academic) or manage classroom interactions and proceedings effectively (Managerial as well as for rapport construction (Social/ Cultural). . Academic functions were classified into the following sub-functions: "Explaining aspects of English", "Translating words and sentences", "Eliciting", "Talking about learning", "Reviewing", and "Checking comprehension". The managerial function involved five minor functions: "Giving instructions", "Managing discipline", "Monitoring", and "Drawing attention". The sub-functions of Social/Cultural functions were "Establishing rapport", "Drawing upon shared cultural expressions", and "Praising".

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Setting and participants

The study was conducted at a private language institution in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam where the researcher is currently lecturing. Three EFL teachers volunteered to participate in this research. All three of them are native speakers of the Vietnamese language. There are two female teachers and one male teacher with their ages ranging between 27 and 35. Their teaching experience ranges between 3 and 6 years. The school is one of the most reputable language institutions in Vietnam with 13 premises across the country, offering a variety of English course such as Test Preparation Courses (IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, SAT and TOEIC), Academic English courses as well as Business English. In addition, the institution is an official partner of Pearson Education Group and over 100 primary school and high schools nationwide. Data presented in this study consisted of 9 lesson hours of audio recordings in the two Academic English classes and one Communication English class.

The Academic English course session took place 3 times a week for a total of 32 lesson hours with non-native speakers of English and the Communication English course session also took place 3 times a week but for a total of 36 lesson hours with both non-native and native speakers of English, each lesson lasting one and a half hours. The number of students per class was between 15 and 25. The students were at a pre-intermediate level and aged between 12 to 35 years old. The main teaching material was a language teaching course book designed for pre-intermediate learners. The course book used was a commercial, monolingual book published by a global publisher. Classroom activities were designed for teaching 2 language skills: Listening and Speaking as well as Grammar and vocabulary.

3.2 Instruments

Following Sali's methodology, in order to study the Vietnamese EFL teachers' use of L1 at both practical and theoretical level, 6 audio-recorded lessons and informal interviews will be used. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the study from the management. The school has been informed regarding the purpose and possible contributions of the study, the data acquisition methodology and the position of the researcher. Students have been told that the researcher was only interested in classroom activities in general and that the researcher would be a non-participant observer throughout the research.

3.2.1 Audio-recordings

To gain an insight on the discourse of L1 use, all three teachers and their respective English classes were observed, two lessons per class, bringing it to a total of 6 lessons (one and a half hours for each lesson) by means of audio-recordings which was eventually transcribed. Each participating teacher was observed for a period of 4 weeks (one lesson every two weeks). The researcher also took observation notes to supplement the audio-recordings. The reason for choosing to do observations by means of audio-recordings was because the researcher wanted the teachers not only give examples of situations when they intended to use L1 (in the interviews) but also through observing one of their lessons to find out when and if they actually code-switched.

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participating teachers at the end of the second observation in order to comprehend their perspectives on the use of L1. The reason why the interviews were made after the second observation was that the researcher did not want interview questions which dealt with teachers' code-switching habits to influence the teachers' code-switching behaviour in the classroom. At the beginning of the interview the teachers were asked if it was okay that the interview was recorded. The researcher explained the reason for the study, that the researcher was the only one who was going to listen to the recording and that it would be destroyed after this paper was finished. All respondents answered that it was okay and none of them seemed to feel, uncomfortable that the interview was being recorded. The interviews were then transcribed and listened to several times. The questions that the teachers were asked dealt with their perspectives on the use of L1 in Vietnamese EFL classroom (see Appendix 1). Each interview took approximately 5 minutes. They were conducted in Vietnamese, which is the native language shared both by the participants and the researcher to let them express their thoughts as freely and comfortably as possible.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Research question 1: What are the functions of L1 as used by Vietnamese EFL teacher for students of pre-intermediate levels?

Data from each of the teacher's respective lesson was analysed carefully. This provided a comprehensive understanding and answers to the research issues. The analysis resulted in three major and 20 minor function categories, as shown in Table 1. The three major functions of L1 use from the data were: Academic, Managerial and Social/ Cultural.

The Academic functions of L1 use concerned how the content of the lesson was communicated and comprised of the following sub-functions: "Translating words and sentences", "Checking comprehension", "Explaining pronunciation aspect", "Explaining grammatical aspect", "Explaining language skills", "Explain difficult vocabulary items", "Talk about learning", "Giving feedback", "Reviewing", "Checking learners' output", "Correcting errors", and "Eliciting".

The Managerial functions of L1, on the other hand, served to manage the lesson and student behaviour efficiently. It also comprised of five minor functions: "Giving instructions", "Drawing attention", and "Managing discipline".

Social/ Cultural functions of L1 were observed when academic focus of the lesson was towards rapport construction. When the teachers would like to share cultural expressions such as idioms, to ask for feedback on their way of teaching, to praise their students, or to apologize (i.e. "Establishing rapport", "Drawing upon shared cultural expressions", "Praising", and "Giving feedback after lesson")

All categories are listed as follows:

- Translating words and sentences: teacher uses the L1 to give the translation of a word, an expression, or a sentence.
- Checking comprehension: teacher uses the L1 to check students' understanding of what she/ she just explained

- Explaining pronunciation aspects: teacher uses the L1 to explain the aspects of pronunciation, such as production, intonation, phrasing, stress, and timing.
- Explain grammar aspects: teacher uses the L1 to explain grammatical point.
- Giving feedback: teacher uses the L1 to comment on learners' answers of the assigned exercises or tasks.
- Explaining difficult vocabulary items: teacher uses the L1 to explain the meaning of some complicated term by putting it into a context.
- Reviewing: teacher uses the L1 to review the studied grammatical point.
- Explaining language skills: teacher uses the L1 to teach students how to deal with a certain type of question in listening task.
- Talking about learning: teacher uses the L1 to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively.
- Eliciting: teacher uses the L1 to prompt and solicit more learner response
- Check learners' output: teacher uses the L1 to check student's correct answers of the assigned task.
- Correcting errors: teacher uses the L1 to correct their learners' grammatical errors, pronunciation and incorrect vocabulary.
- Giving instruction: teacher uses of L1 to give instructions for an activity or a task
- Managing discipline: teacher uses the L1 to deal with lack of concentration, noise, talk, misconduct, etc.
- Drawing attention: teacher uses the L1 to draw students' attention.
- Establish rapport: teacher uses the L1 in a sense of closeness with students either to show understanding or to create a friendly rapport.
- Drawing upon shared cultural expressions: teacher uses the L1 which can be considered to be shared cultural features.
- Making jokes: teacher uses the L1 to make a joke.
- Praising: teacher uses the L1 to praise a student's work.
- Giving feedback after lesson: teacher uses the L1 to give comments on his/her own performance or students' performance at the end of the lesson.

Table 1: Occurrences of major and minor functions of L1

Major and related minor categories for functions of L1 use	No of occurrences (Total = 646)	Percentage
Academic	416	64%
Translating words and sentences	106	16%
Checking comprehension	90	14%
Explaining pronunciation aspects	62	10%
Explaining grammar aspects	32	5%
Giving feedback	31	5%
Explaining difficult vocabulary items	22	3%
Reviewing	19	3%
Explaining language skills	15	2%
Talking about learning	15	2%
Eliciting	13	2%
Checking learners' output	6	1%
Correcting errors	5	1%
Managerial	162	25%
Giving instruction	78	12%
Managing discipline	75	12%
Drawing attention	9	1%
Social/ Cultural	68	11%
Establishing rapport	41	6%
Drawing upon shared cultural expressions	11	2%
Making jokes	6	1%
Praising	4	1%
Giving feedback after lesson	4	1%

4.2 Research question 2: What are EFL teachers' perspectives on the use of L1 in Vietnamese EFL classrooms?

The interviews enabled the researcher to understand the teachers' perceptions behind their L1 use. All of the teachers reported that the rate of English use in the classroom should depend on the student's level and they saw a positive value in the use of L1.

Teacher A shares that:

"I don't use English absolutely in my class. It all depends on the level of my students."

From the observation data, teacher A is the one who used the least L1 compared to the others.

Teacher B has a more positive view on L1 use and considers it as a tool for achieving her lesson objectives in the classroom.

“How much L1 and L2 used in the classroom are largely dependent on the objectives of the course, level of the students and on a need-to basis in the classroom”.

Teacher C says that she uses Vietnamese to assure learner comprehension and increase communication. This use of L1 has also been confirmed in the observation data:

“The rate of using English in class depends on the level of students. If they are at a basic level, we need to use Vietnamese – mother language to help them comprehend the lesson. On the other hand, we need to use English as much as possible for advanced level classes or preparation courses in order to enable them not only to approach the foreign language but also improve their listening skills as well as responses.”

These findings coincide with those found in Song and Andrews (2008), de la Campa & Nassaji (2009), McMillan & Rivers (2011), Solhi & Büyükyazi (2011), and Kayaoğlu (2012) that the teacher’s decision regarding the use of L1 is reliant on several factors such as the students’ proficiency, type of task, etc.

Below are some quotes reflecting the teachers’ reasons behind their use of L1:

“Firstly, I use Vietnamese in case there are words which are difficult to be explained, especially nouns or advance vocabularies so that my students can understand their meanings...if the level of students is low, their ability of interpreting the meaning, listening and acquisitioning is not so good enough, we need to define some vocabularies in Vietnamese so that the students comprehend how to use and apply them into a proper context...Sometimes we use English but students are not quick enough to respond in English therefore we need to use Vietnamese occasionally to activate them, and make them interested in the response.” (Teacher A)

“For preparation courses such as IELTS and TOEIC, I often use Vietnamese to teach my students strategies to deal with certain question types to ensure their comprehension and to save time. For Communicative English classes, I try to speak as little Vietnamese as possible. However, sometimes when the level of complexity in the meaning of certain vocabulary items or grammar explanation is high I will switch to Vietnamese to explain. I also use Vietnamese to make jokes to help my students relax”. (Teacher B)

Similarly, teacher C explains:

“In basic level classes, the students often learn vocabularies and basic grammar structures, therefore we need to explain the definition in Vietnamese so that students can comprehend the vocabularies first and then be skilful enough to use them. I also use Vietnamese in upper classes especially to explain some scenarios or when they don’t understand when reading a text or a listening excerpt in English. To draw the students closer towards us, we need to remind them in Vietnamese because they can understand immediately and may feel a closer relationship between teachers and students.”

All these reveal another interesting finding: There are various factors affecting the teacher’s decisions on their use of L1 or L2. As the quotes above implied, the teachers saw a benefit in switching the code if the emphasis is on grammar, vocabulary or exam tips. These findings are in line with the observation of Liu et al. (2004), Forman (2010, 2012) and Sali (2013). In Liu et al.’s study at secondary school English classes in South Korea, L1 was often used to clarify grammar and vocabulary. In Forman’s research on 9 EFL teachers at a university in Thailand, Forman found that L1 was regularly used to give information regarding sounds, grammar, meaning, usage or to explain the culture of the target language, in this case English.

However, in this study, explanations in L1 were usually about sounds, grammar rules, vocabulary and no L1 was used to make explanation about the culture. In Sali’s study, the most

common function of L1 was to explain English grammar to enable immediate understanding. In addition, they viewed the learner's competency as the basis of their decision on L1/L2 use. The teachers mentioned that they relied heavily on L1 for managerial purposes and to convey pre-task or sometimes in-task instructions. Their primary justification for using L1 was again to provide better learner comprehension and to help learners complete their tasks successfully. This finding was also demonstrated in earlier research studies. Macaro's study (2001), for example, stated that the delivery of instructions was the teachers' main reason for using L1 in French classes at a high school. De la Campa and Nassaji (2009), in their study conducted at German as foreign language classes in Canada indicated that 'conveying activity instructions' was the second most common L1 use.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This research revealed that L1 in the Vietnamese EFL classroom served a wide range of functions. Teachers often switched to L1 either for academic and managerial purposes or to interact with their students. The most common function of L1 was to "translate words and sentences" to make sure the learners managed to grasp the full meaning of a particular vocabulary and its eventual acquisition.

As being the second most common function, "checking comprehension" was a tool to encourage learner output. "Giving instructions" was another evident function of L1 which enabled the teachers to involve the learners in the given tasks. The teachers viewed L1 positively and tend to have the impression that L1 in the EFL classroom helped facilitate learner comprehension as well as their decision-making processes. Other justifications concerning the use of L1 was dependant on learner factors such as their proficiency level and teaching objectives.

"Explaining pronunciation aspects" is the fourth largest category which emerged in the data. In this study, the teachers did compare and contrast English pronunciation with L1 to teach their learners how to produce certain sounds in an accurate or intelligible way. By practicing pronunciation in the classroom the teachers also help their learners to improve their listening skill.

A variety of L1 functions were also observed in the EFL classroom as follows: "monitoring", "establish rapport", "explain grammar aspects", "give feedback", "manage discipline", "explain difficult vocabulary items", "reviewing", "explain language skills", "talk about learning", "elicit", "drawing upon shared cultural expressions", "draw attention", "check learners' output", "making jokes", "correct errors", "praise", "giving feedback after lesson", and "apologize".

One issue pertaining to the uncontrolled used of L1 in classes is that teachers might use it sparingly out of convenience, such as in the case of giving regular classroom instructions. The abuse of L1, as mentioned by Ellis (1984), needs to be addressed as it may deny the students from valuable L2 input.

This research did not allow us to make generic conclusions beyond that of the participating teachers due to its limited sample size. However, the research outcomes are of importance for those designing curriculums on language teaching methodology and highlight an urgent need to educate L2 teachers on the proper utilisation of L1 in their respective lessons.

All the teachers in this research did not seem to have any firm policy regarding the use of L1 and L2 in actual teaching practice. This implies that they did not have a clear guidance on how to balance the use L1 or L2 in the classroom. Some implications that can be drawn from this research are as follows:

- There seems to be an urgent requirement to assist the EFL teachers in developing their strategies relating to the proper execution of L1 and to generate awareness in the controlled use of L1. For example, they should be trained and taught teaching methodologies on L1 and L2 use and discuss their benefits and disadvantages.
- EFL teachers should make critical decisions regarding the function of L1 in their current or future classroom.
- EFL teachers should do peer-observation and reflect on their L1 use.
- Teachers should be provided with guidelines (e.g. paraphrasing, miming, drawing, etc.) to ensure the optimal use of L2, particularly for classroom management situations.
- They should also reflect on their teaching as well as linguistic practices, with the guidance from their mentors. Self-observation (video-tape) is a key tool (Polio & Duff, 1994).

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