

The use of first language in the EFL classroom: A facilitating or debilitating device?

Mehdi Solhi

Department of English Language and Literature
Istanbul University, Turkey
solhi.mehdi@gmail.com

Münevver Büyükyazı

Department of English Language and Literature
Celal Bayar University, Turkey
munevverbuyukyazi@gmail.com

Abstract: Despite widespread use of only English in teaching EFL classes, the use of first language in EFL class has been a perennial topic of discussion in the field of language education. Most established L2 teaching methods discourage the use of L1 in class. However, some scholars oppose “English Only” trend in language classes (Auerbach, 1993; and Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In a setting where the students share a common L1, first language can create a less threatening atmosphere. In this article, the non native speaker teachers’ attitudes toward the use of the first language of the learners in the classroom were asked through a questionnaire. Further, an attempt was made to investigate whether non native speaker English teachers notice the use of the first language as a facilitating or a debilitating factor. This article argues that first language is one of the useful resources that students bring to the L2 classroom and can be used in a judicious fashion.

Key words: First language, English only trend, facilitating device and judicious fashion

Introduction

It has always been a controversial issue to use the first language (L1) of the students in the foreign language (FL) classroom. The L1 is perhaps the most useful and the least-used resource students bring to the FL classroom. This is partly due to some factors. The theory and practice of established methods discourage the use of L1 in the FL classroom. The monolingual approach suggests that the target language ought to be the sole medium of communication, implying the prohibition of the native language would maximize the effectiveness of learning the target language. In situations where students have little opportunity to meet the FL outside the classroom, maximizing the use of the FL in the classroom is very important. One way to do is to carry out classroom management in the FL. If it is done in a planned, consistent way, it can supply a very effective meaningful focused input. However, in classrooms where all the learners share the same L1, there is a tendency for tasks which should be done in the L1, and there are sound arguments that support the use of L1 in the FL classroom. Activities such as conversation, discussion of intensive reading, preparation for writing etc. are done in the L1 because using the L1 is more natural with others who have the same L1; it is easier and more communicatively effective, and using the FL can be embarrassing for those who feel themselves not proficient enough in it.

Some researchers have investigated the use of the L1 in the FL classrooms thoroughly. According to one view, the use of L1 may provide learners with additional cognitive support that allows them to analyze language and work at a higher level than the situations where they are restricted to sole use of their FL (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks and Donato, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 2000). Wood et al. suggest that the L1 assists learners in the process and completion of the tasks. In their study, Brooks and Donato (1994) showed that the L1 was used for three functions: to comment on their FL use; to establish a joint understanding of the task and to formulate the learners’ goals. Swain and Lapkin (2000) argue that the L1 may facilitate L2 classroom activities, particularly for low-proficiency students and on complex tasks. In addition, some researchers think that prohibition of mother tongue use with monolingual students at lower levels of English proficiency is practically impossible (Nunan and Lamb, 1996). According to Dörnyei and Kormos (1998) the L1 is used by L2 learners as a communication strategy to compensate for deficiencies in the target language. Auerbuch (1993) confirms the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom; she also identifies the following uses for it: classroom management, language analysis, presenting rules that govern grammar, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors, and checking for comprehension. The results of the study conducted by Schweers (1999) on the attitudes toward using

L1 in the L2 classroom indicate that the majority of students and teachers agreed that Spanish should be used in the EFL classroom.

Using the L1 was found to have profound effects on some language skills. In a study, Knight (1996) reported that the learners who did the preparatory L1 discussion in groups did much better on the L2 written task than other learners who did preparatory L2 discussion even though that discussion was in the same language as the subsequent written task. Similarly Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) determined the positive attitudes towards the use of the L1 in completing tasks in L2 settings. Thus, it is possible to say that L1 has a useful role in helping learners gain the knowledge needed to reach a higher level of L2 performance.

Another important effect of the L1 use has been reported on vocabulary learning. There are numerous ways of conveying the meaning of an unknown word. Studies comparing the effectiveness of various methods for learning always come up with the result that an L1 translation is the most effective (Laufer and Shmueli 1997). This is probably because L1 translations are usually clear, short and familiar –qualities which are very important in effective definitions (McKeown, 1993). When the L1 translation is combined with the word cards, learners have a very effective strategy to speed up their vocabulary growth (Nation, 2001). This finding also receives some support from studies of dictionary use. To effectively use a monolingual dictionary, learners need to have a large enough vocabulary storage (at least 2000 words) and need to be able to interpret definitions, which are much more difficult than L1 synonyms. That is why surveys of dictionary preference (Laufer and Kimmel, 1997; Atkins and Varantola, 1997) and learner use (Baxter, 1980) show that learners strongly prefer bilingual or bilingualized dictionaries.

Despite the amount of studies carried out all over the world on the L1 use in the second language and FL classrooms, to our best knowledge, the number of studies investigating this issue in Turkey is very limited. Çelik (2006) indicates that especially the English teachers who work for the state high schools of the Ministry of National Education are not expected to use the foreign language efficiently enough; therefore, their use of the L1 in their courses is inevitable. The teachers' inefficiency in the FL results from the ineffective use of the FL during their education processes in the Teacher Training Institutions. Candidate teachers may prefer not to speak or to speak in Turkish during their education (Bekleyen, 2004). Şad (2009) reported that there are four reasons for the candidate teachers not to use FL in their lessons. These are: (1) course content or the practice of teaching; (2) not having a collaborative or an encouraging classroom atmosphere (anxiety level of the teachers increased in such atmospheres); (3) not being proficient enough in vocabulary and pronunciation, and (4) not having some standard norms on the use of the FL in the lessons. According to a recent research by Şevik (2007), most of the teachers and students are not against mother tongue, and mother tongue contributes to language learning towards various aims and at different levels.

Inspired by the studies on the use of L1 use in FL classrooms, we decided to carry out a study on the use of the native language in the Turkish context, where English is taught as a foreign language and where the learners and most of the teachers share one common L1. We aimed to analyze the L1 use of the Turkish teachers in their FL classrooms and their rationales for this.

Method of the Study

A questionnaire was devised to gain insight into how teachers evaluated their perception of the use of the first language of the EFL learners in the classroom, from the vantage point of their daily practice. In the first four questions, we tried to get some demographic information about the teachers. The questions inquired their age, year of experience in teaching, their educational background, and their affiliation. The fifth question aimed at getting some information about whether the teachers allow the learners to use their L1 in the classroom. It was an open-ended question so that they could explain their reasons. The purpose of the sixth question was to get some information on the teachers' L1 use in the classroom. It was also an open-ended question which enabled them to explain their rationale for that. This questionnaire was sent out to nearly 110 teachers throughout Turkey, and exactly 72 were returned. However, only 57 of them were taken to final evaluation since some of them lacked the information required. Data was analyzed using SPSS package program (Version 15.0). Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the demographic information of the participants. The responses given for the last two questions were classified under various subheadings and were given as frequencies and percentages.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic information about the participants

Demographic information gathered via a questionnaire revealed that 17 of the teachers were males; 44 of them were females. They have been teaching for a mean of 10.80±6.5 years. The information about their age, education levels and affiliation is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

	n= 57	f	%
Age	21-25 years	5	8.8
	26-30 years	19	33.3
	31-35 years	12	21.1
	over the age of 36	21	36.8
Education	Bachelor's degree	22	38.6
	Master's degree	20	35.1
	PhD	15	26.3
Affiliation	Primary school (State)	2	3.5
	Primary School (Private)	2	3.5
	University (State)	35	61.4
	University (Private)	18	31.6

Attitudes of teachers towards L1 use of the learners in the class

Among the six questions asked there were two which are of particular relevance here. One elicited whether respondents allowed the learners to use the first language in the classroom or they preferred to prevent the learners from using it. Nearly half (f= 48; 84.2%) went for the first option, i.e. that the main emphasis had been on allowing the L1 use in the classroom, while 15.2% said they do not allow L1 use during the lessons.

The other question elicited whether respondents, as teachers, use the first language in the classroom or they prefer to follow the English only in the class. According to the results, 79% (f= 45) believed that using the first language of the learners would be beneficial, while 21.1% (f= 12) said that the reverse was true.

Why do teachers allow their learners to use L1 in the class?

The first research question inquired the reasons of the teachers for allowing or forbidding the use of the L1 in English classrooms. The answers given to this question were analyzed descriptively and given as frequencies and percentages. The reasons of the teachers who allowed the learners' L1 use were categorized under 16 headings (Table 2).

Table 2: Reasons of the teachers to allow learners to use the L1

	Items	f	%
1.	Level and interest of the learners	30	23.07
2.	To explain something difficult and unclear and to ask questions about some parts/points they haven't understood	25	19.23
4.	To ease the burden of the learners and to lower anxiety	10	7.70
5.	It depends on the type of the lesson	9	6.92
6.	For vocabulary learning	9	6.92
7.	It saves time	8	6.15
8.	To avoid misunderstanding	6	4.61
9.	To prevent misunderstandings	5	3.84
10.	To ensure comprehensible input	5	3.84
11.	Only at the beginning of the school	4	3.07
12.	Forcing to use FL all the time can lead to negative attitude	4	3.07
13.	To have them provide connections between L1 and FL	3	2.30
14.	They are not confident enough to use FL	3	2.30
15.	To give feedback on the activities	3	2.30
16.	They lack motivation to use FL in and outside the classroom	3	2.30
17.	While preparing for the tasks	3	2.30
	TOTAL	130	100

The vast majority of teachers of English in Turkey are non-native speakers. It might be eminently useful to have a closer look at those who allow the first language of the learners to be used in the classroom. Here are some

comments from teachers who believe that sharing their students' L1 makes the learners feel relaxed and more confident. "Using L1 in the classroom lowers the anxiety level of the learners and the learners feel more relaxed" (7.70%; f= 10); "They can explain something unclear and difficult, and they can also easily ask questions about some parts/points they haven't understood" (19.23%; f= 25); "Some respondents describe the shared L1 as strength: "Using L1 helps the learners avoid misunderstandings" (3.84%; f= 5); "It is very useful especially for vocabulary learning" (6.92%; f= 9); "It just saves time; the learners easily express themselves" (6.15%; f= 8). And several make reference to the level and interest of the learners: "It depends on the learners' level; I usually allow the low level or beginners to use their L1, but as their level improves I restrict its use" (23.07%; f= 30); others state that they allow the learners to use L1 because they lack motivation and confidence to use FL in and outside the classroom: "Most learners believe that they can't speak English, and they also believe that they will never have an opportunity or a necessity to use the FL outside the classroom. They either use L1 or keep quiet" (2.30%; f= 3). Quite many teachers believe that allowing the use of L1 is dependent on the type of the lesson: "I don't allow them to use their L1 during skill based activities, especially during speaking activities; however, they can use L1 during grammar and vocabulary teaching sessions" (6.92%; f= 9). Some also find it useful while the learners prepare for some tasks (2.30%; f= 3).

Why do not the teachers allow the learners to use L1 in the classroom?

Analysis of our data revealed that the majority of the teachers believed that using the first language of the learners would be beneficial; however, 15.2% said that they would not allow L1 usage in their classes. The teachers who indicated that they did not allow their learners to use the L1 in the classes justified themselves under six main points. They are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons of the teachers not to allow learners to use the L1

	Items	f	%
1.	To have them practice FL	7	24.13
2.	To increase FL development	5	17.25
3.	To prevent L1 use from being a bad habit.	4	13.79
4.	They are learning English so they have to use it.	4	13.79
5.	To master all skills	4	13.79
6.	To prevent misbehavior in the classroom	5	17.25
	TOTAL	29	100

Of the 12 teachers, 7 believed that the learners do not have any other opportunities for practicing the FL than the classroom; therefore those teachers wanted to provide their learners with opportunities so that they can use the FL as much as possible (24.13). 17.25% of the teachers believed that using FL in the classroom can increase FL development; if they let the learners use their L1, they would never improve themselves in the target language. Some teachers also stated that allowing L1 use in the classroom leads to misbehavior (17.25%; f= 5). They also justified themselves stating that encouraging the FL use may prevent the learners from having a bad habit of using the L1 use whenever they find themselves in a difficult situation; in order to master all skills FL use is required; they are there to learn English; therefore they have to use it (13.79%; f= 4 for each)

Why do teachers use L1 in the classroom?

In Turkey, most teachers of English are non-native speakers. Teachers and learners share the same language, so there are homogenous classrooms in terms of languages shared. Some teachers make use of this situation and state clearly that they find using the L1 in the classroom beneficial. The analysis of our data enabled us to classify the reasons of the teachers to use the L1 in the classroom under 13 items (Table 4).

Table 4: Reasons of the teachers to use the L1

	Items	f	%
1.	To explain new or difficult grammar structures	26	23.21
2.	Depending on the learners' language levels	16	14.28
3.	To teach complicated or abstract vocabulary	12	10.71
4.	To make them relaxed and confident	10	8.92
5..	To explain how to write something (in writing courses)	7	6.25
6.	Depending on the needs of the learners	7	6.25
7.	To save time	6	5.35
8.	To establish a good learning atmosphere	6	5.35

9.	To check comprehension	6	5.35
10.	To explain long and complicated instructions	5	4.46
11.	To give feedback	4	3.57
12.	To teach some sub-skills or strategies	4	3.57
13.	To express some culture-based terms	3	2.67
	TOTAL	112	100

Many teachers indicated that they use the L1 to explain new or difficult grammatical patterns (23.21%; f= 26). The other important thing they stated was the level of the students (14.28%; f= 16). They said that especially with the low level students they needed to make explanations in the L1. However, as the level of the learners gets better, they prefer to use L2 in most of the contexts. Vocabulary teaching, especially teaching abstract words also necessitated the use of the L1 (10.71%; f= 12). Some teachers believed that using students' mother tongue makes them relaxed and confident as they understand much better (8.92%; f= 10). In addition, using the L1 creates a good learning atmosphere. Some teachers used L1 to tell some jokes or just to have an informal chat with the learners (5.35%; f= 6). The other reasons were found related to the skills to be taught (e.g. writing), needs of the learners, comprehension check to avoid ambiguity and confusion, and saving time.

Why do not teachers use L1 in the classroom?

Despite being in the minority, some teachers stated that they never use the L1 in their classes (21.1%; Table 5)

Table 5: Reasons of the teachers not to use the L1

	Items	f	%
1.	To make learners hear correct pronunciation	10	38.46
2.	To provide massive amount of meaningful input	8	30.76
3.	To enhance learners' thinking skills and communicative competence	4	15.39
4.	In speaking classes	4	15.39
	TOTAL	26	100

Majority of those teachers believed that they are the main sources of correct pronunciation (38.46; f= 8) and comprehensible input (30.76%; f= 8) in the classroom. They also stated that using FL in the classroom would enhance the learners' thinking skills and communicative competence (15.39; f= 4). For them, especially in skill classrooms, the medium of instruction should be English (15.39%; f= 4).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the present study on the use of the mother tongue in Turkish EFL contexts revealed many similarities to the previous research. Similar to the previous research findings (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks and Donato, 1994; Schweers, 1999; Storch and Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Tang, 2002), majority of the Turkish teachers of English participated in this study stated that they found the use of the L1 beneficial. Some discrepancies exist and they can be explained with the level of the learners those teachers deal with and the goals of the institutions they work in. In Turkey, there are two types of universities: state and private. In most of the private universities the medium of instruction is English. Therefore, the learners should reach at a certain level before their sophomore years. Teachers working in these institutions should keep the L2 use at a maximum level. Similarly, in private primary and high schools, one of the most important objectives is to get the learner at a desired level in the L2. However, in most of the state universities and nearly all the state primary and high schools this is not the case. As Çelik (2006) indicated, the FL level of the English teachers working for the Ministry of National Education is not efficient enough to enable them to use the FL as the medium of instruction. As they cannot use the FL effectively, they have to allow the learners to use their L1 during the courses. According to Bekleyen (2004), even the candidate teachers prefer to use their L1 during their education and in his study, Şad (2009) tried to clarify the reasons for L1 preferences of these teachers-to-be. Considering the previous research findings, we may conclude that our study revealed similar results with the previous research either conducted in different countries or in Turkey.

Our results also draw some parallels with the previous research in terms of the reasons why teachers find the L1 use in the classroom beneficial. According to the studies conducted before, one of the most effective ways of teaching vocabulary is the translation of the words since they provide clear, direct and more concrete information about the meaning (Laufer and Shmueli 1997; McKeown 1993). A great number of teachers in our study indicated that they use and allow the use of L1 especially during vocabulary teaching and learning.

This study also revealed that the L1 in the Turkish schools plays a supportive role rather than be the medium of instruction because a large number of teachers stated that they allowed its use and they used it only with the low level students (i.e. with beginners or elementary level learners). As the learners improve in the process, teachers stated that they reduced the amount used or they restricted it to a minimum. They also stated that they use the L1 depending on the type of the lesson and the activity. Even if the medium of instruction of the majority of the learners will not be in English in the future, the efforts of the English teachers should be appreciated.

Our results also confirm the findings of Auerbuch (1993). Although her study was conducted in an ESL setting, it is quite pleasing to see quite similar reasons of the Turkish teachers in their L1 using and allowing their learners' L1 use. Like her identification of the L1 use, the teachers participated in this study stated that they use the L1 to explain complicated grammar rules, difficult and abstract words; long and complicated instructions of the activities and games, to give feedback, and to check comprehension.

Unlike the participants in Tang's study (2002), majority of the Turkish students are not motivated enough to learn and to become proficient in English. According to the comments given by the teachers participating in this study, a vast amount of learners believe that they will not use English in their future careers; they will not find opportunities to use English outside the classroom; and most of them lack motivation and confidence to communicate with a foreigner in English. Therefore, most of the learners consider English as a curricular requisite and their main purpose is to get an average grade that will enable them to pass the course.

A close look at the research in the field of the L1 use in EFL and ESL classrooms show that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in the English classrooms can facilitate the teaching and learning processes. Thus, the role of the L1 should not be over emphasized. We agree that English should be the main instrument in the classroom communication. However, we suggest that second language learning can be facilitated by raising awareness to the similarities and differences between the L1 and FL. Another suggestion can be extended to the teachers who would like to overcome the obstacles of the learners while using the FL. If they choose manageable tasks within the learners' proficiency level, use staged and graded tasks, inform learners of the learning goals of each task, discuss the value of using the FL in class, and use non-threatening tasks, L1 use may be kept to a minimum; FL use might be increased.

References

- Anton, M., & DeCamilla, F. (1998). Socio-cognitive functions of LI collaborative interaction in the L2 classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 54, 314-342.
- Atkins, B. T. S., & Varantola, K. (1997). Monitoring dictionary use. *International Journal of Lexicography*, 10, 1-45.
- Auerbach, E. (1993). Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 9-32.
- Baxter, J. (1980). The dictionary and vocabulary behaviour: a single word or a handful? *TESOL Quarterly*, 14, 325-336.
- Bekleyen, N. (2004). Öğretmen ve sınıf arkadaşlarının yabancı dil sınıf kaygısı üzerindeki etkileri. *Dil Dergisi*, 123, 49-66.
- Brooks, F. B., & Donato, R. (1994). Vygotskyan approaches to understanding foreign language learner discourse during communicative tasks. *Hispania*, 77, 262-274.
- Çelik, S. (2006). Türkiyedeki İngilizce konuşan yerli ve yabancı İngilizce öğretmenleri arasındaki suni mücadeleye yönelik kısa bir araştırma. *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, 14, 371-376.
- Dörnyei, Z. & Kormos, J. (1998). Problem-solving mechanisms in L2 communication: A psycholinguistic perspective. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 20, 349-385.
- Knight, T. (1996). Learning vocabulary through shared speaking tasks. *The Language Teacher*, 20, 24-29.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*, London: Yale University Press.
- Laufer, B., & Shmueli, K. (1997). Memorizing new words: Does teaching have anything to do with it? *RELC Journal*, 28, 89-108.
- McKeown, M.G. (1993). Creating effective definitions for young word learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 17-31.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Storch, N., & Wigglesworth, G. (2003). Is there a role for the use of the L1 in an L2 setting? *TESOL Quarterly*, 37, 760-770.
- Nunan, D., & Lamb, C. (1996). *The self-directed teacher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schweers, W. Jr. (1999). Using L1 in the L2 classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 37, 6-9.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2000). Task-based second language learning: The uses of the first language. *Language Teaching Research*, 4, 251-274.
- Şad, S. N. (2009). Aday İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Alan Derslerinde İngilizce Konuşmama Nedenleri: Nitel Bir Çalışma, **XVIII. Ulusal Eğitim Bilimleri Kurultayı**, 1-3 Ekim 2009, Ege Üniversitesi, İzmir.
- Şevik, M. (2007). The place of mother tongue in foreign language classes. Ankara University, *Journal of Faculty of Educational Sciences*, 40, 99-119.
- Tang, J. (2002). Using L1 in the EFL classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 40, 36-43.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17, 89-100.