

USE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN ELT CLASSES: WHEN AND WHY?

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ÖZET

Yabancı dil öğretiminde anadilin kullanılması uzun zamandan beri tartışılan bir konudur. Bazı dilbilimciler hem öğrencilerin hem de öğretmenlerin anadili kullanmaları tezini savunurken, diğer bir grup ise sınıf içindeki anadil kullanımının daha derinlemesine araştırılması kaydıyla böyle bir tezin son zamanlarda benimsenemeyeceğini öne sürmektedirler. Bu tartışmaya katkıda bulunmak amacıyla bu araştırmada Çukurova Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalı'ndaki sınıflarda anadilin, Türkçe'nin, ne zaman ve niçin kullanıldığı ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışma, özellikle anadilin öğretmenler ve öğrenciler tarafından kullanılıp kullanılmadığını, kullanılıyorsa nerede, ne zaman ve niçin kullanıldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma sonuçları yukarıdaki görüşlerden ikincisi ile aynı doğrultudadır. Buna göre öğrenme-öğretme süreçlerinde ortaya çıkan çeşitli faktörlere bağlı olarak yabancı dil öğretiminde anadil kullanımının her zaman önemli bir yer tuttuğu görüşü desteklenmektedir.

ABSTRACT

There has been a debate upon the use of mother tongue (L1) in foreign language classes for years. While some scholars argue that it should be used neither by students nor by teachers, others claim that total prohibition of its use is now unfashionable provided that the potential of its use in classroom is explored further. As a contribution to this debate, the research reported here concerns the use of L1 (Turkish, in this case) in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Unit of Faculty of Education, Çukurova University. It specifically investigates whether it is applied by teachers and students in class, and if so, when and why. The results of the research seem to be in line with the latter view mentioned above that there is always a place for the use of L1 depending on various factors arising from the teaching and learning process in class.

Introduction

When language learning was under the influence of behaviourist thinking, it was considered taboo for either students or teachers to use students' mother tongue in class. This was particularly true at elementary and intermediate levels, where it was believed that use of L1 would encourage L1-L2 (target language) interference and laziness, and slow down the process of L2 sound-word association (Spratt, 1985). Since the types of language teaching activities were mainly confined to accuracy practice in the controlled contexts of various kinds of teacher-centred work, not only the student's but also the teacher's need to use L1 was restricted.

However, with the contribution of communicative approach to language learning, the nature of classroom activities has changed, and students are given the opportunity to do not only accuracy practice but also fluency practice. Beside drills to teach accuracy, students have been involved in various communicative tasks such as information-gap activities, jumbled paragraphs, and jigsaw readings, where they are expected to cope with varied aspects of communication such as discourse signals, broken sentences, and cohesive devices, to name but a few (ibid, 1985). Teachers also have taken a new role. They are not mainly initiators and correctors of classroom speech, but also consultants, encouragers and monitors. This classroom atmosphere may well bring about some occasions for the use of L1 since students may find it difficult to say or write things they do not know how to. Research on this subject show that if the teacher does not encourage them to overcome such difficulty through the use of L2, they may now have plenty of opportunities to use L1 (Atkinson, 1987). Teachers, too, may well consider using L1 to explain things to students, for instance, to give instructions, for comprehension work on authentic texts (Spratt, 1985), for presentation and reinforcement of language, and even for testing (Atkinson, 1987).

Unlike in behaviouristic times, since there now seems to be no clearly defined line on whether L1 should or should not be used in class, teachers generally wonder about the following questions:

- *Should I use L1? If so, on what occasions?
- *Should I prevent students from using L1 in class?
- *When could it be suitable and useful for them to use L1?
- *Why do students need to use L1?
- *Which means can I provide students with to stop them using L1? (Spratt, 1985).

Drawing on these questions, this study investigates the use of L1 (Turkish) both by the teachers and students in the ELT Unit of Faculty of Education, Çukurova University. The primary motivation for the research has stemmed from the following reasons:

1. that whether the mother tongue should or should not be used in language classes has been a controversial issue for many years, yet, to the researchers' knowledge, there is no adequate empirical study on this;

2. that in the researchers' own experience, as the teachers of foreign language, they usually face such a dilemma;

3. that they believe that implications of any research on the subject under discussion could be essential, especially for the departments who are in charge of training prospective English language teachers.

Research Design

The research is descriptive in nature and involves a small population. For this reason, rather than prescribing guidelines concerning the use of L1 in class, it aims to describe what is actually happening in the setting under study. This is for the purpose of awareness-raising which, as a result, may give us an opportunity to evaluate our own teaching process with special reference to the use of L1.

The research is considered by the researchers as an initial step for a wider scale one with a larger group of participants. Therefore, for the purpose of data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared because it was thought that the responses to be obtained through open-ended questions could be used as a base for the preparation of a structured questionnaire that the researchers aim to utilise in the future. Bearing in mind the initial and small-scale nature of the research and the nature of the questionnaire administered, no pure statistical data analysis procedures were applied to analyse the data. Instead, frequencies of the responses given to particular questions included in the questionnaire were taken.

Instrumentation

In the questionnaire (see Appendix 1 and 2 for teachers' and students' version of the questionnaire) administered to 24 teachers and 50 students in the ELT Unit, the teacher participants were asked:

- *whether they ever use Turkish in class;
- *if so, on what particular occasions;
- *if they do not use it, why not?;
- *their attitudes towards students' use of Turkish in class, i.e. whether they are against it or not?;
- *if they are against it, how they prevent them from using Turkish; and
- *if they are not against it, why not?;

Similarly, the student participants were asked:

- *whether they ever use Turkish in class;
- *if so, on what particular occasions;

- *if no, why not?
- *their attitudes towards their teachers' use of Turkish in class, i.e. whether they are against it or not?;
- *if they are against it, why?; and
- *if they are not against it, why not?.

In the questionnaire, space was also provided to obtain additional comments from both groups.

Data Findings of the Study

The purpose of this section is to present the data findings obtained from the responses given to the questionnaire by the teachers and students.

The first observation (see Table 1 below) derived from the data is that all the students and an overwhelming majority of the teachers responded to the questionnaire claim that they use the L1 in class.

Table 1. Teachers' and Students' Views about the Use of the L1 in Class

Teachers			Students		
Yes (f)	No (f)	Total (f)	Yes (f)	No (f)	Total (f)
20	4	24	50	0	50

It is also observed (see Table 2 below) that the teachers state various occasions on which they use it.

Table 2. Occasions on which Teachers Use the L1

When	(f)
1 the teacher explains and clarifies instructions, problems of structure and of vocabulary	7
2 students seem to be overtired or get lost	3
3 the teacher wants to save up time	2
4 the nature of the course requires	2
5 meta-language is used	2
6 the teacher checks students' comprehension	1
7 categories 4, 6, and 1	1
8 categories 6 and 2	1
9 categories 4 and 2	1

Those who claim not to use the L1 in class put forward the reasons presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Teachers' Reasons for not Using the L1 in Class

Because		(f)
1	the teacher is a model for students' improvement in L2	1
2	the nature of the courses the teacher is giving requires L2 environment	1
3	the level of students makes the teacher use body language rather than L1	1
4	L2 is perceived not only as a medium for instruction but also as a means for communication	1

As for the occasions on which the students use the L1, a vast majority states that they use it when they do not have adequate knowledge of the L2 (English) (see Table 4 below).

Table 4. Occasions on which Students Use the L1

When		(f)
1	the students do not have adequate knowledge of L2	44
2	the students use meta-language	2
3	their teachers speak in L1	2
4	the students are afraid to do errors in speaking in L1	1
5	the ongoing conversation in class in L1	1

It is worth noting here that although it has been expected that the students who should have stated Occasion 1 must have been the first and second year students, given their inadequate experience in the L2 as comparison to the third and fourth years, it is in fact observed that the number of the latter group is the same as the former one (see Table 4.1 below).

Table 4.1 Level Distribution of Students for Occasion 1

YEARS	(f)
1 st	14
2 nd	8
3 rd	10
4 th	12
TOTAL (f)	44

This may suggest that there is no correlation between the students' educational level and their language competence and that there is still a place for the use of the L1 regardless of language level of the students.

Concerning the teachers' attitudes towards the students' use of the L1, Table 5 below illustrates the results:

Table 5. Teachers' Attitudes towards Students' Use of the L1

Against (f)	For (f)	Total (f)
17	7	24

As it is seen in the table, more than half of the teachers participated do not favour students' use of the L1. And these teachers indicate various ways that they use to prevent their students from using it. These reasons are given in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1 Ways Teachers Use to Prevent Students from Using the L1 in Class

Teachers	(f)
1 ignore the student speaking in L1 and respond him/her in L2	8
2 encourage the student to restate in L2 what s/he has stated in L1	7
3 warn him/her (either inside or outside class) to speak in L2	1
4 categories 2 and 3	1

Out of 17, eight state they ignore the student and respond her/him in the L2. Seven claim that they encourage the student to restate in the L2 what s/he has stated in the L1. While one says that he warns him/her to switch into L2, another teacher claims to use both encouragement (item 2) and warning (item 3).

Table 6. Students' Attitudes towards Teachers' Use of the L1

Against (f)	For (f)	Total (f)
20	30	50

Table 6 above shows the students' attitudes towards their teachers' use of the L1 in class. As can be seen in the table, more than half claims to favour their teachers' use of the L1 in class. When the level distribution of the students is considered (see Table 6.1 below) it is interesting to see that among these participants the majority comprises the first year students. It is also worth mentioning that more than half of the students who claim to be against the use of the L1 by their teachers are the fourth years. This may suggest that awareness concerning the importance of being exposed to the L2 environment has increased in line with the students' educational experience.

Table 6.1 Level Distribution of Students' Views Concerning Teachers' Use of the L1 in Class

Year	Against (f)	For (f)
1 st	1	13
2 nd	3	7
3 rd	5	7
4 th	11	3
TOTAL (f)	20	30

Table 6.2 below illustrates the students' reasons for being against teachers' use of the L1. Out of 20, 13 students say because the class is the only environment for them to be exposed to the L2. Some even state that the more they hear and speak, the better they get in the L2. It seems necessary to remind that these students are mostly the fourth years. Another seven claim that the teacher should be a good model for them in using the L2 so that they would feel obliged to speak in the L2.

Table 6.2 Students' Reasons for Being against Teachers' Use of the L1

Because		(f)
1	The class is the only environment for the students to be exposed to L2. The more the student hear and speak, the better they get in L2.	13
2	The teacher should be a good model for the student in using L2. If so, the students would feel obliged to speak in L2.	7

The teachers who claim not to be against students' use of the L1 state the following reasons as presented in Table 7:

Table 7. Teachers' and Students' Reasons for not Being against Students/Teachers' Use of the L1 in Class

TEACHERS			STUDENTS		
Because		(f)	Because teachers' use of L1		(f)
1	the nature of the courses they are in charge of teaching either requires (e.g. translation) or allows students to use L1	2	1	contributes to their understanding and retaining what they have learned	25
2	they see no problem if students feel at ease in L1	2	2	is believed to be essential for learning unknown vocabulary more effectively	2
3	they want to save up time	1	3	is believed to be useful for reinforcement and clarification purposes	1
4	they believe communication, be it either in L1 or in L2, is important	1	4	saves up time	1
5	if students are forced to speak in L2 they refrain from speaking at all	1	5	arouses students' interest towards the lesson	1

Likewise, the students who are not against their teachers' use of the L1 give several reasons as illustrated in Table 7 above. It is remarkable to note here that 25 students, a vast majority, believe their teachers' use of the L1 contributes to their understanding and retaining what they have learned. Taking their level of language

competence into account, it is natural to find out that those who put forward this reason are mostly the first and second year students (see Table 7.1 below).

Table 7.1 Level Distribution of Students for Reason 1

Years	(f)
1 st	11
2 nd	6
3 rd	5
4 th	3
TOTAL (f)	25

Other reasons are that it is essential for learning unknown vocabulary effectively (2 students); it is useful for reinforcement and clarification purposes (1 student); it saves up time (1 student); and it arouses students' interest towards the lesson (1 student).

Regarding additional comments obtained from the teachers, they said that
 "Teachers should be a model for students in using L2 from the very beginning."

"Knowledge has no value if not transmitted in L2. So students should be able to use L2 effectively to show their knowledge."

"If teachers do not speak in L1 from the very beginning students may be forced to use L2, but not for all courses, e.g. translation."

"I believe one's L1 can be used as a valuable tool in foreign language teaching for motivating purposes, when relevant and if used in small amounts."

"If the teacher and the student feel the need to use L1, why not?"

"I do not object to the use of L1 if needed and used in small amounts."

"I am teaching in a monolingual classroom. For this reason I sometimes use L1 and let my students use it."

The students stated that

"We had better have native speaker teachers."

"It is important for us to be provided with an environment in which we can develop our ability to think in English."

"Classes are mainly teacher-centred. This gives us only few opportunities to practice our spoken English."

"Teachers want us to speak accurate English. This makes us refrain from speaking in class at all."

"We want extra-curricular activities for improving our spoken English."

"Apart from the usage, we need to be taught the use of English."

"I never force myself to speak in L2 because it is easier for me to express myself in L1."

“Although I always have a tendency to speak in L2, I can not do it because I feel social pressure from my classmates who never speak in L2.”

“Although I am a senior student I still have problems in communicating in L2.”

“We should be encouraged, even obliged to speak in L2. The classroom is the only place to practice.”

“It is our teachers who prepare the context for us to speak in L1.”

Discussion of Data Findings

This study describes the use of the L1 both by the teachers and students in ELT classes. The results of the study show that the use of the L1 is considered by both groups not to be anathema in foreign language teaching and learning.

Considering the data obtained from the teachers participated in the study, it can be stated that the teachers need to use the L1 on various occasions. These occasions vary depending on various factors, such as the aim of the teacher, the nature of the given course, the level of students, and the nature of the ongoing conversation in class.

Moreover, although the majority of the teacher respondents states that they themselves use the L1 when needed, another majority claims not to allow their students to use it in class. However, the findings also show that a minor group claims to let their students use the L1 depending on the nature of the course they are in charge of teaching and their philosophy of teaching and learning.

Regarding the data obtained from the student participants, it is remarkable to note that a big proportion of the students use the L1 when their knowledge of the L2 is inadequate. In line with this finding, it is not surprising to see that a majority of the students claims not to be against the use of the L1 by their teachers because they believe that it is to their own benefit.

Furthermore, regarding the attitudes of the two groups towards the use of the L1 in class, it is observed that the views of the teachers who oppose the use of the L1 and of the students who object to their teachers' use of the L1 coincide at one point that both groups believe classroom is the only context to improve their speaking in the L2 and that the teacher should be a good model for students in this respect.

Conclusion

Under the light of evidence acquired from the data findings of this research, it seems possible to give a few suggestions which may provide implications for the teaching and learning process in the ELT classes since the research is ELT- specific.

First, the research has revealed that L1, Turkish in this case, has a contributing function in one way or another in teaching and learning process, so there is always a room for its use in class. This implies that teachers should be flexible with regard to its use, but such flexibility should not give way to any habit formation on the part of students.

Second, as the use of the L1 was claimed to be attributed mostly to the inadequate knowledge of students in the L2, priority should be given to designing language learning tasks which can give students ample opportunities to effectively communicate in the L2 as early as possible. As for teachers' method of teaching, this requires a shift from a teacher-centred approach to teaching to a student-centred one.

Last but not the least, it is believed by the researchers that initiative pertaining to the use of L1 in class should be left to teachers who are the individuals expected to prepare appropriate conditions for effective and efficient teaching and learning process. To this end, they should consider, as suggested by Spratt (1985):

- *what needs L1 is filling in class;
- *what affective role the use of L1 is playing; and
- *how important that affective role is.

References

Atkinson, D. 1987. *The mother tongue in the classroom: a neglected resource?* ELT Journal, 41/4, pp. 241-247.

Spratt, M. 1985. "Should we use the L1 in the monolingual FL classroom?" In A. Matthews et al.(Eds). At the Chalkface. Practical Techniques in Language Teaching. London: Edward Arnold.

Appendix 1
Questionnaire (Teachers' Version)

Dear colleagues,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out the use of mother tongue in ELT classes. Your invaluable responses will hopefully provide implications for the teaching and learning process taking place in those classes. While responding to the questions, please consider the nature of the courses (i.e. skill-based, literature, methodology and/or linguistics) you are in charge of teaching. Thank you for your co-operation and collaboration.

Rana Yıldırım
Gülden Mersinligil

1. Do you ever use mother tongue in class?

A) Yes

B) No

2. If your answer to Question 1 is “yes”, please state **on what particular occasions** do you use mother tongue?

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3. If your answer to Question “ is “no”, please state the reason/s.

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4. Are you against students' use of mother tongue in class?

A) Yes

B) No

5. If your answer to Question 4 is “yes”, please tell what you do to prevent them from using mother tongue in class.

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6. If your answer to Question 4 is “no”, please indicate the reason/s.

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Additional Comments:

Appendix 2
Questionnaire (Students' Version)

Dear students,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out the use of mother tongue in ELT classes. Your invaluable responses will hopefully provide implications for the teaching and learning process taking place in those classes.

Thank you for your cooperation and collaboration.

Rana Yıldırım
Gülden Mersinligil

1. Do you ever use mother tongue in class?

A) Yes

B) No

2. If your answer to Question 1 is “yes”, please state **on what particular occasions** do you use mother tongue?

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3. If your answer to Question “ is “no”, please state the reason/s.

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4. Are you against teachers’ use of mother tongue in class?

A) Yes

B) No

5. If your answer to Question 4 is “yes”, please indicate the reason/s.

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6. If your answer to Question 4 is “no”, please indicate the reason/s.

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Additional Comments: