

THE USE OF L1 IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Monika Gaba

Zeynep Kocoglu

Abstract

In English Language Teaching (ELT) profession, there still is no general consensus on the use of mother language (L1) while teaching a target language (L2). Views on the issue differ from both person to person and approach to approach. There are proponents of L1 who believe it can be used when necessary. There are also those who totally shun the use of the mother tongue because, according to them, it hinders the learning of a foreign language. This study tries to contribute to ELT field by examining the effects of the use of L1 on the internalization of L2 grammar structures in Turkish university English preparatory school. 165 students whose major is business, participated into the study. The study attempts to analyze how one of the variables changes when another variable is manipulated and has an explanatory nature. The relationship between the dependent and independent variables is established through the analysis of data collected through two tests: an achievement test and a progressive test by means of descriptive statistics and t-tests. This study could not find hard evidence in favour of L1 being used in the L2 context.

Introduction

It is a widely acknowledged fact that the use of native language (L1) in the classroom while teaching target language (L2) has always been the source of considerable controversy. Many schools have strict policies about the use of L1 in the L2 classroom; that is, instructors should avoid using L1 at all times. However, in some cases, the use of L1 may be not only beneficial, but also extremely necessary, especially if both the teacher and the students share the same mother tongue. This paper aims to contribute to the English Language Teaching (ELT) field by examining the effects of the use of L1 in the context of a private university in Istanbul, Turkey.

For many years, research has encouraged instructors of English not to use any language but English in their classrooms (Mattioli, 2004). Still, Mattioli believes that despite this, the use of L1 in the language classroom is sometimes inevitable, especially with beginners as L1 might facilitate the comprehension process and make the teacher's instructions clear. However, he emphasizes the fact that although such a compromise is necessary for elementary students, it is no longer necessary for those learners who move past this phase in the proficiency ladder. In a similar vein, Howatt (1984) posits that as long as the medium of instruction is concerned, the prevailing idea in L2 education is that a second or foreign language should be learned by using that language. The use of L1 in the language classroom has been largely associated with negative consequences in the acquisition of L2 (Song, 2009). Teachers hold different views towards the use of L1 in the L2 classroom; beliefs which have been shaped by their experience and teaching philosophies. In a study conducted with instructors at a tertiary educational institution, Song (2009) found that the teachers' attitude towards L1 ranged from neutral to negative and positive. In addition, those beliefs were sometimes not applied in practice. Atkinson (1987) argues that the issue of L1 being used in the L2 classroom has been taken for granted and has been never given the attention that it deserves. He argues that the students' mother tongue can play a great role in helping adult learners to develop fluency, especially activities which are based on translation. Auerbach (1993) investigates the same issue from a different perspective; he examines the issue from a political and social issue. The claim made by Auerbach is that the pressure to use English in L2 classrooms has been justified on linguistic and pedagogical grounds, which are not supported by evidence. Auerbach offers an alternative explanation to the prevailing only English policy. He argues that such a policy stems from a specific ideology which serves to increase the inequality in the world. According to Auerbach, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom is not only beneficial but also mandatory for those adult learners that have limited literary skills in L1. Greggio and Gil (2007) conducted a qualitative study which aimed at examining the code-switching that occurs in a language classroom. They concluded that the use of the students' mother tongue (Portuguese) facilitated the interaction among students. Another conclusion reached by the researchers was that code switching enhanced students' performance as the language

learning process became easier for them. Anton and Dicamilla (1999) are strong advocates of the utilization of L1 in the L2 classroom. According to them, L1 constitutes a psychological tool which the learners can easily manipulate in order to “construct effective collaborative dialogues in the completion of meaning-based language tasks”. Anton and Dicamilla further contend that L1 is an indispensable mechanism for adult learners in providing each other with “scaffolded” feedback. In such cases, L1 takes over a social function as it creates an environment where sharing and mutual contribution help learners fulfil their tasks. In a similar vein, an anonymous Internet-based questionnaire carried out by Levine (2003) in order to investigate the relationship between the use of the target language and the students’ anxiety language revealed a strong negative correlation between the variables.

De La Funte and Scott (2008) posit that the use of L1 in the language classroom can have a positive impact on the learning process. In a study conducted with intermediate level students De La Funte and Scott, found that when asked to complete a grammar task, the students who were allowed to communicate and collaborate in their mother tongue outperformed the groups required to use L2. De La Funte and Scott concluded that the use of L1 enhanced the students’ performance because their cognitive overload decreased. Harbord (1992) contends that the use of L1 in L2 education should not stem from a desire to make things easier for both students and instructors. On the contrary, both teachers and students should resort to L1 when there is a need for further clarification or in order to generate discussions and speculations. The use of the target language in the language classroom has long been justified by comparisons drawn between the first and second language acquisition and the maximal exposure of students to the target language (Cook, 2001). However, Cook argues that all these assumptions are questionable and that different methodologies have already legitimized the use of L1 in teaching a foreign or second language. Seeing the mother tongue as a resource and not a hindrance will open up new avenues for both teachers and students. Cooks argues that L1 within the language classroom can serve different purposes ranging from facilitating group work among students to explaining a difficult grammar point. She further claims that the use of L1 in L2 education can be a useful mechanism in order to create” L2 authentic users”, provided that such a mechanism is manipulated wisely. Although in theory L2 education has been

dominated by an only English policy and a total avoidance of L1 in the L2 classroom, many teachers still resort to the use of L1 quite frequently (Littlewood and Yu 2011). In emphasizing such a big discrepancy, Littlewood and Yu suggest a balanced compromise between the use of L1 and TL in the classroom. They offer various strategies to achieve such a balance where the ultimate aim is a maximal exposure to the target language while enjoying the benefits that L1 might offer, especially benefits, which enhance the students' performance. Turnbull and Arnett (2002) acknowledge that there is some kind of consensus on the fact that teachers should made great efforts to maximize the exposure of their students to target language input; however, defining the amount of input in terms of quality and quantity remains elusive. Therefore, they feel the need for further research in this area. According to Turnbull and Arnett, further research is also needed to determine whether using L1 might facilitate the process through which input is transformed into intake. Liu et al. (2004) justifies the uses of L1 as explaining difficult vocabulary and grammar, giving background information, overcoming communicative difficulties, and saving time.

As it emerges from the review of existing literature, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom has both opponents and supports. Although L1 has been shunned from the L2 classroom for a long time, recent evidence suggests that it can be a beneficial tool in foreign language teaching.

Theoretical Framework

At this point, there seems to be no general consensus on the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. While the use of L1 used to be shunned with the advent of the Communicative Approach in the early 1980s, over time, many linguists have changed their minds on this issue. Today, there are both proponents and opponents of L1 use in the classroom, and no study to date has succeeded in demonstrating a “casual relationship between exclusion of L1 and improved learning” (Macaro, 2001).

Research question

Do advanced young adult learners who receive instructions and feedback in L1 achieve a better internalization of L2 (target language) grammar structures than students who receive instructions and feedback in the target language?

The research variables and other operational definition:

Independent variables

Instructions and feedback in L1: detailed explanations of grammar rules and corrections made in the students' mother tongue (Turkish) whenever it is necessary.

Instructions and feedback in L2: detailed explanations of grammar rules and corrections made in the target language (English)

Dependent variable

Internalization of L2 grammar structures: The internalization of L2 grammar structures refers to the process during which L2 grammar structures become part of the learner's interlanguage system. In other words, when a structure is internalized, the learner is able not only to recognize the grammar structure, but also use it correctly. This construct can be measured through tests that are administered after the grammar structures have been taught and reinforced through positive and negative feedback delivered during the lesson.

Controlled extraneous variables

The choice of the grammar structure: Students were taught the same grammar structure because certain grammar structures are acquired more easily than others. Therefore, in order to avoid such a bias, the same grammar structure was taught and reinforced in both classes. The target grammar structure that was covered in class was *relative clauses* (reduced and non-reduced).

Other operational definitions:

Young adult learners: The term is used to define learners whose ages range from 18 to 20 years old.

Advanced learners: Learners who scored between a minimum of 59 points and a maximum of 100 points in the Placement Test administered at the beginning of the academic year.

Pre – test: achievement test which aims at finding out whether all the participants in the study had the same level of proficiency.

Post – test: progressive test which aims at measuring and comparing the performance of participants in the experiment and control group.

The research method

This is a quantitative study as it seeks to investigate the relationship between two variables: the use of L1 in the L2 classroom and the internalization of L2 grammar structures. The study attempts to analyze how one of the variables changes when another variable is manipulated and has an explanatory nature. The relationship between the dependent and independent variables is established through the analysis of data collected through two tests: an achievement test (see Appendix A) and a progressive test (see Appendix B). This means that a statistical analysis of numeric data was implemented. However, the study cannot be defined as an experimental one because the sampling method that was utilized for the research was not random. The participants for this study were chosen according to a nonrandom sampling procedure, namely convenience sampling. Consequently, the research is a study of quasi-experimental nature. In addition, this research falls under the category of primary research because it involved the collection of data that did not already exist; the research collected original data. The entity that is analyzed in this study is the performance of individual students in two different classes; therefore, the students constitute the unit of analysis.

Population and sampling method

The target population of this study comprises all the A level (advanced level) students at a Turkish private university Preparatory School. The accessible population for this study comprises 8 A level classes which consist of students whose major is business, 165 in total. In other words, all the students in these classes receive ESP lessons which focus on business.

The students for this study were drawn from the business classes. For this research, the researchers elicited the participation of four advanced A level medicine classes which were conveniently available. These classes have 20 advanced students each, thus we had the participation of a minimum of 80 students. We realized that it could be argued that such criteria for class selection as well as the sample size do not provide a basis for

generalization. However, there was no other viable alternative given the resources we had available. Despite these limitations, care was taken to provide a detailed description of the participants in the study, which would make the replication of the research possible. First of all, the participants' ages vary from 18 to 20 years old (69 participants were 18 years old, 10 participants were 19 years old and one participant was 20 years old). The control group had 18 females and 22 males. The group that received the treatment consists of 24 females and 16 males. The control group was made up of 21 females and 19 males. All participants receive six hours of intensive English instructions every day, three hours of reading, writing and grammar and three hours of ESP or content-based English where they are taught business-related concepts and specific vocabulary related to their major. At the time of the experiment, all the participants in the study had been exposed to English for at least 8 months. Their first language was Turkish. Two classes which served as the control group received for two weeks instructions and feedback in the target language (English). The other two classes served as an experiment group, so they received instructions and feedback in L1 (Turkish).

Data elicitation instruments and data analysis tools

Two different data elicitation tools were utilized for this study:

1. A pre-test (achievement test): the test aimed at comparing the linguistic ability of the control and the experiment group prior to the intervention.
2. A post test (progressive test): the test aimed at comparing the students' grammar performance after the experiment group received the treatment.

The instruments that were used to gather data were an achievement test, used as a pre-test and a progressive test, used as a post-test. Both tests were developed by the testing office of University Preparatory School. The data consist of the students' scores; the pre-test was administered to both groups in order to make sure that all participants were of the same linguistic level. The post-test was administered to both groups after the target grammar structure (relative clause) had been practised and reinforced. The post-test results were compared to see whether the experience group outperformed the control group. The instruments chosen for this research fall under the category of subject – completed instruments. The tests were 100 point criterion-referenced tests with a cut-off of 60 points. The tests have a relatively high usability as it takes only 50 minutes to complete them, so

they can be administered during normal classes. In order to avoid scoring subjectivity, two different markers assessed the students' papers. In case there were discrepancies, the judgement of a third marker was required.

Data collection

At the beginning of the experiment, before the treatment was given, both the control and experiment group were given an achievement test to make sure that the groups were on the same or similar levels of English ability. This achievement test served as a pre-test. In other words, the pre-test was administered to rule out the possibility that some of the students in either group may have had prior knowledge on the Grammar point tested. All students took the test at the same time. During the test they were allowed to ask questions if they needed further clarification. After the pre-test, both groups were taught the grammar point (defining and non-defining relative clause); for two weeks the structure was practised and reinforced. However, in the control group the teacher's instructions and feedback were all the time in English, while in the experiment group, the teachers used the students' mother tongue in order to give feedback or explain the grammar rules whenever it was necessary. After the intervention was delivered, both groups took a progressive test. The results from this post-test were compared in order to see whether the difference in the groups' performances were statistically significant. All the students took the exam at the same time.

Results and discussion

The pre-test results of both groups, the control and the experiment group, were analysed in terms of central frequency and dispersion. The data was also analysed by using a paired samples t-test. As it can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, the average of the experiment group (72, 20) is higher than that of the control group (66, 45). However, such a difference is statistically insignificant, as was shown by the paired samples t-test. The results in the experiment group have a slightly wider spreading (22,062) compared to the scores spreading in the control group (17,891).

As far as the kurtosis, the maximum and the minimum scores are concerned there is either a slight difference or no difference at all.

Figure 1. Graphic representation of pre-test results

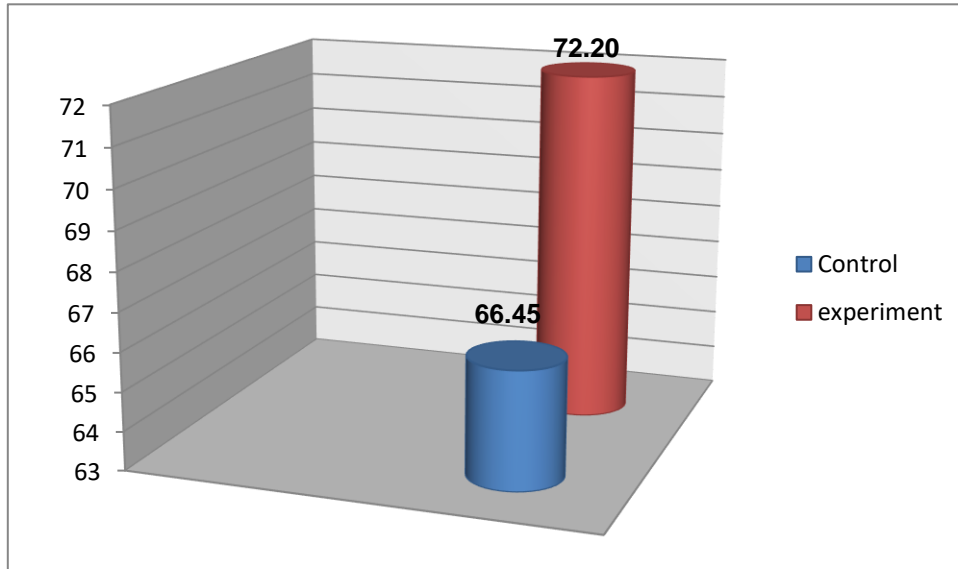


Table 2. Descriptive analysis (pre-test results)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
control	40	21	100	66,45	17,891	-,121	,374	-,131	,733
experiment	40	20	100	72,20	22,062	-,680	,374	-,212	,733
Valid N (listwise)	40								

As mentioned above, the pre-test scores were also compared through a paired samples t-test. The results of the paired samples t-test (see Table 3) reveal that the performance of the students in the experiment group is not significantly different from the performance of students in the control group, since the alpha coefficient is only .211. Since the alpha

coefficient is significant if its level is between .00 and .05, the difference in performance between the experiment and control groups is not significant. This means that at the beginning of the experiment all students had the same level of linguistic ability. Therefore, we were able to rule out any alternative explanations related to students' linguistic ability. In other words, prior to the delivery of the intervention, all the participants had similar levels of language proficiency.

Table 3. Paired samples T- Test (pre-test results)

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 control - experiment	-5,750	28,613	4,524	-14,901	3,401	-1,271	39	,211

The post-test scores were analysed through descriptive analyses and an independent samples t-test in order to see whether the experiment group performed significantly better than the control group. The results of the post-test revealed that the experiment group performed slightly better than the control group (see table 3 & 4). The average mean of the experiment group was 69, while that of the control group was 63. The results in the experiment group have a slightly wider spreading (22,019) compared to the scores spreading in the control group (21,408). As far as the maximum and the minimum scores are concerned there is only a slight difference between the two groups. Still, although the discrepancy in the performance of both groups is obvious, it is not big enough to be considered statistically significant.

Figure 2. Graphic representation of the post-test results

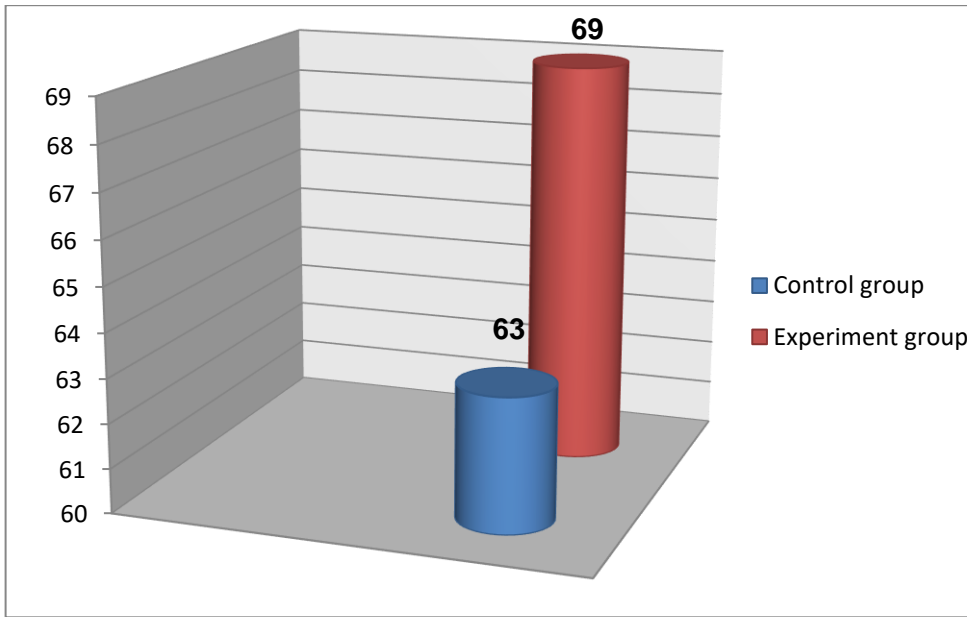


Table 4. Descriptive analysis (post-test results)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
control	40	16	99	63	22,109	-,473	,374	-,695	,733
experiment	40	20	100	69	21,408	-,772	,374	-,159	,733
Valid N (listwise)	40								

The post-test scores were also analysed through an independent samples t-test (see table 5). The aim was to see whether after receiving the treatment (explanations and feedback in L1), the experiment group would outperform the control group. The results of the independent samples t-test reveal that the performance of the students in the experiment group is not significantly different from the performance of students in the control group

since the alpha coefficient is 0,227. An alpha coefficient bigger than 0,05 means that the discrepancy in performance between the groups is not statistically significant, therefore, the hypothesis set at the beginning of the experiment cannot be confirmed. Although I started with the assumption that the experiment group (the group that received the instruction in L1) would achieve a better internalization of grammar structures than the control group (the group that received the instructions in L2), I could not find enough support to confirm this hypothesis. To briefly sum up, the difference in performance between the control and the experiment group is not statistically significant.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-Test (post-test results)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	,286	,594	-1,218	78	,227	-5,925	4,866	-15,612	3,762
Equal variances not assumed			-1,218	77,919	,227	-5,925	4,866	-15,613	3,763

The present study gives some empirical evidence that adult learners who receive instructions and feedback in their mother tongue achieve a better internalization of grammar structures than those who receive the instruction in the target language. However,

the research findings are not strong enough to support the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the study. Although the experiment group did better than the control group, the difference in their performance is not statistically significant.

Limitations of the study

The findings of this research are not in line with (Macaro, 2001) and Atkinson (1987), who assert that in the context of second language acquisition, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom enhances students' performance. The reason behind such a disagreement might be the weaknesses of this study. External validity is the weakest point of this research. Since a random sampling was not feasible, the sample was drawn from resources that were available to the researcher; consequently, the findings of the research cannot be generalized to the whole population. However, the study can be replicated to see whether it yields the same results or not. Another weak point is the sample size. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for determining sample size, this study should have had a minimum of 226 participants as the target population (N) is 586 students. Yet, due to certain circumstances, only 80 students could be drawn for the study and this might have compromised the reliability of the findings. The limitations of this study might offer alternative explanations to the study's findings. Therefore, all these limitations should be taken into consideration when the data is interpreted or if the study is to be replicated in the future.

Conclusion and suggestions for further research

Unfortunately, in the world of ELT (English Language Teaching), there still is no general consensus on the use of L1 while teaching L2. Views on the issue differ from both person to person and approach to approach. There are proponents of L1 who believe it can be used when necessary. However, the term 'when necessary' remains ambiguous. There are also those who totally shun the use of the mother tongue because, according to them, it hinders the learning of a foreign language. This study could not find hard evidence in favour of L1 being used in the L2 context. However, further studies should be conducted on this issue involving both sides of the spectrum. Rather than entirely focusing on what is or what is not viable in the field of ELT from the perspective of academicians, students should also be consulted. After all, they are the ones who are facing the biggest obstacles while learning

a new language. In what circumstances, if at all, would students like their teachers to resort to L1? Also, in a classroom where the students and the teacher share the same mother tongue, how does a teacher feel when he or she knows that the students do not understand what is being taught? If the teacher is a proponent of L2 use at all times, how does he or she deal with this issue? Does he or she completely ignore it or employ another technique to handle the situation? These are issues that need to be investigated thoroughly.

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