

A Review of Research on the Use of Native Language in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Studies conducted so far predominantly deals with interior and exterior factors influencing achievement in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning process. One of the certain considerations in the EFL learning process is the use of students' native language. Thus, this study aims to review the studies conducted on the pros and cons of using first language (L1) in the EFL classes. For this purpose, the study looks over the related literature to obtain research results and make practical recommendations. In the study, it was concluded that there are series of advantages and disadvantages of using L1, responsibilities of teachers and expectations of learners, pointed out by previous studies. Finally, the study ends up with practical recommendations for learners, teachers, curriculum designers and researchers.

Keywords

English as a foreign language; the use of native language; learning

Submission date

24.05.2018

Acceptance date

14.06.2018

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APA Citation

Savran-Celik, S. & Aydın, S. (2018). A review of research on the use of native language in EFL classes. *The Literacy Trek*, 4(2), 1-14.

Introduction

There are certain agents advancing and reducing achievement in EFL learning. Teacher's manner, students' attitude, age, motivation and the content affect and push the individual to become successful. Among those factors, teacher who has different skills and strategies plays one of the most important roles in this respect. Borg (2006) reports that foreign language teachers have an important role because of the *dynamic nature of language, the scope and complexity of the content of language teaching, the*

range of materials, methods and activities available to language teachers, the especially close relationships between language teachers and learners, and issues relating to the status of native and non-native language teachers (p. 29). EFL teachers are expected to help learners develop their proficiency and competence in English, and help them bring about favourable changes in their foreign language skills. Marks (1990) suggests that the EFL teachers should become more aware of their role as a teacher- facilitator, the processes of teaching and learning, choice made in the domains of materials, methodology used for teaching, interaction that enables self-propelled and self-monitored. Thus, they must strike a balance between giving responsibility to learn and take responsibility to teach properly (Byram, 2009). To be brief, teacher is a key factor directly affecting the achievement due to several reasons. First, by developing their professional competence, searching for new teaching techniques and methods and having a well-classroom management, teachers can do their best for the achievement. Thus, they are expected to regard students' independence, level, maturity, autonomy, interests and design the course accordingly. Second, to promote interpersonal and functional skills, activities like presentation, group working, duration- based homework like portfolio must enrich the courses. Learning with and from colleagues is so effective in learning English as a foreign language (Byram, 2009). In addition, the collaborative and communicative approaches must be preferred in the teaching and learning process. By communicative approach, performing role-plays, question-answer tasks and acting in target language, students become readier than ever to understand and speak well. Thus, an EFL teacher should foster learners' motivation regarding students as human beings who are valued and are active in the classroom settings (Pahlavannejad, 2013). Third, the course plan must include visual, auditory and physical instruments to compete with the students' preferences and make the lesson more enjoyable (Byram & Grundy, 2002). Fourth, teachers should consider monotony in class and textbooks to teach more effectively. Fifth, for efficient instruction, EFL teachers must look for the ways of supplying extracurricular exercises by means of which naturalistic learning situations can be formed (Oktay & Osam, 2013). Finally, teachers' strategies for using students' L1 constitute another considerable factor that may affect learners' achievement in EFL learning.

Hearing L1 in EFL classes has both advantages and disadvantages (Cook, 2001). First, L1 has a necessary and facilitating role during the foreign language learning process. Especially at lower levels, L1 plays a supportive role in explaining the meaning of words and grammar structures. Second, L1 is a source of confidence and a signal of success for these students. Third, by raising awareness of similarities and differences between two languages, a foreign language can be learned so readily. In addition, approving L1 as a classroom property leads several ways to advance it, such as for teachers to express meaning, clarify grammatical issues, coordinate the class properly, and for students to take advantage of L1 as their cooperative learning source and individual strategy (Cook, 2001). Teachers can advance their students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their EFL competence. Furthermore, using L1 is more preferable and economical to explain the meaning, abstract words, and the aim of the lesson, check students' understanding, use warm-up activities and motivate the students (Weschler, 1997). When it comes to the disadvantages of using L1 in EFL learning process, hindering the desired fluency comes at first. According to Selinker (1992), *too much reliance on the first language will result in the fossilization of an interlanguage* (Weschler, 1997: 88). Second, learners' productivity and awareness may be automatically reduced. Third, excessive use of L1 keeps learners' attraction away from learning English. Instead of losing time while explaining in L1, the teacher should use English structures. Moreover, using the target language for classroom interaction keeps students from being alerted on the language that is new for them and learning beforehand in a subconscious way. Eldridge (1996, p.306) states that the *native code ... may function as a kind of stopgap, while the (target code) is being retrieved*. To be brief, though the point of the use of students' native language in the foreign language classroom has been discussed, there is no a consensus on the issue.

There have been several changes to and from the use of the first language in EFL classes for many years, related to the social and political circumstances and strategies in EFL approaches and methods (Mouhanna, 2009). Different teaching methods and approaches have adapted the significance of L1 use in the English as a foreign language classroom. This pedagogic concern, though, has not been completely

supported by research results. In other words, teachers are left to work about first language presence in the classroom on their own (Critchley, 2002). To add, the inclusion or exclusion of L1 has been based on unexamined beliefs and assumptions. In other words, studies still try to develop a framework of student's needs, teacher's perceptions of using L1. Researchers seek to highlight the importance of L1, the advantages and disadvantages of using it in EFL classes, try to explain the teacher and student roles dynamically. For all, this study looks over the studies having been carried out prior to the present time.

Research on the Use of Native Language in EFL Classes

In academic circles, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom has been debated. In this part, the studies, carried out on the use of L1 in L2 classroom until now, are framed and main points are emphasized. Firstly, the contributions of L1 are exemplified according to the findings of several studies. Secondly, the best ways to integrate L1 into EFL classroom are stated and ambiguous points are enlightened. Thirdly, in conclusion, the drawbacks of L1 use are exemplified as the findings indicated.

Various studies conducted on English learners have indicated that use of L1 might make an extension to EFL learning. For example, Méndez (2012), in his study, focused on the presence of the native language with the foreign language and teacher cooperation in CLIL frameworks where the foreign language was the less focused language. Méndez (2012) aimed to investigate the cooperation among teachers, especially between language assistants and teachers, with the successive use of two languages in the same classroom and at the same time. Méndez (2012) concluded that teaching practice was based the previous knowledge they may have acquired and their intuitions. Moreover, De La Campa (2009) examined the extent, the objectives, and the reasons why L1 is used in EFL learning environment, and this study revealed that L1 should be used in EFL classrooms, and its use eases and promotes EFL learning. Findings present that in spite of discrepancy on the use of L1 among EFL investigators, the instructors in the conducted study preferred to use L1 in their classrooms for crucial instructional intentions.

According to the results of some studies, L1 may serve as purposeful in EFL learning process. For example, Lin (1990) conducted a study that looked through

language interchange in Hong Kong secondary schools. It was revealed that using only English in the EFL classroom should not be turned into fixed classroom exercise that does not answer the purpose of classroom cases; instead, structuring, frame marking, teacher-student conversation, and vocabulary teaching should be taken into consideration. In a more recent study by Thorne (2009), the role of using L1 in EFL classroom was investigated. Data, including interaction, L1 production and distribution were statistically analyzed. Thorne (2009) found that the language decided might affect following utterances. The results advocate that L1 use comes out naturally in the classroom and it should contain enlightening and calling learners' attention to content related issues.

For that ongoing debate in the field of foreign language learning, findings indicate that translation and code-switching may be applied and serve as purposeful. For example, Harbourd (1992) aimed to look at various ways in which teachers use L1 and what theoretical aspects of learning activities along with contrasting it with alternative ways to use EFL. Participants were separated into three independent groups according to their levels as beginner, intermediate and advanced. Teachers were from several contexts working in the same or similar disciplines. Harbourd (1992), in the study about some alternative techniques regarding using the native language in EFL classes, concluded that cross-linguistic comparing and contrasts should be included but as one of the ample instruments to clarify and exemplify grammatical issues of the target language. The proficient teacher decides when, how and where these linguistic issues are convenient. Moreover, Sampson (2012) aimed to analyze the roles of learners in the process of code-switching in two different EFL classes. The participants were included in two different groups of Spanish-speaking adult learners, attending general English course at a private school in Colombia. Sampson (2012) suggested that code-switching could not be related to learners' comprehension capability and serves as several communicational and learning objectives.

L1 can be a profitable component in providing authentic EFL learning. The study, conducted by Cook (2001) argues that L1 should not be utilized in the classroom by teachers and learners. Cook (2001) conducted this study in order to

determine to accept L1 as a classroom resource. Cook (2001) concluded that L1, instead of coding L1 as an offender, it can be intentionally and consistently used in the EFL classroom. In addition, Billak (2011) presented the rationale for implementing a course book and described how it could help teachers increase English usage through an activity. Results showed that being innovative, surprising children by implementing the activities not only increased English use but also encouraged team building.

Using L1 as a mediator instruction in EFL classes is stated as having both advantages and disadvantages. For instance, Rolin and Varshney (2008), in their study, investigated the effect of teaching on students' point of view about L1 and EFL collocation. For this purpose, they applied a questionnaire including 21 close-ended questions to gather their opinion about L1 and EFL use and two open-ended questions about the pros and cons of using L1 while learning and teaching EFL. They concluded that students attribute a function to L1 to impart knowledge about the EFL medium. Similarly, Scott (2008) conducted a study about that use of L1 that may make an important contribution to EFL learning. Scott (2008) aimed to find out the role of the first language. It is suggested that reading and talking seemed to be at the same time. Additionally, proposing that using L1 for these kinds of tasks decreases cognitive oppression, these findings lead teachers to approach the "problem" with L1 in the EFL classroom. By trying to find out the role of the first language in the study, Scott (2008) recommended that some skills like thinking, reading, speaking seemed to be concurrent and merged procedures for some learners, while these processes seemed to be successive and striving for the other learners.

There are affective, behavioral and cognitive reasons for using or not using L1 in classrooms. A further study, conducted by Al-Dera (2011), is about the use of native language in EFL teaching. Al- Dera (2011) aimed to obtain the participants' attitudes to L1 use at different levels of teaching and learning. Al- Dera (2011) concluded that L1 might play an effective role in the language classrooms at all these levels. L1 has been found useful for explaining the meaning of difficult words and use of grammar. Even a comparative study of the syntax of L1 and EFL may be useful because this often saves students from confusing their L1 syntax with EFL. In addition, Copland (2011) mainly focused on the question about the use of L1 in the

classroom while teaching English. This issue has attracted interest and research whether to apply EFL as the unique classroom language or L1 may be preferred to increase learning and achievement in EFL. With the help of analysis of data collected from classrooms in a Cypriot context and interviews with instructors, a variety of tasks for L1 for different functions use are marked. Copland (2011) concluded that teachers needed to be advocated in determining explanation to local teaching matters. A further study by Rondon- Pari (2012) dealt with the questions asking for how much English, how much Spanish and what functions are used in the classroom. Rondon- Pari (2012) aimed to find out the degrees of using Spanish as a first language and English in a foreign language class. Data were compiled as recordings, observations and an interview with teachers. Results indicated that the focus was generally on grammar and on use of limited linguistic structures.

Littlewood (2011) focused on teachers' using merely the target language and keeping away from using the mother tongue. Littlewood (2011) concluded that L1 might act as *the single biggest danger* in the EFL classroom if it menaces the priority of the target language or *the most substantial collaborator a foreign language can own* if it is practiced consistently. A persistent problem for teachers in EFL situations is related to the students who speak their shared common language instead of English in the classroom. Billak (2011) presented the rationale for implementing a course book and described how it could help teachers increase English use through an activity that was practical, fun, and easy. Results showed that being bold and innovative, surprising children by implementing Eyes on English at school not only increase English use but also lift spirits and encourage team building at both the staff and student levels.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the studies reviewed in this study, several conclusions were reached. First, students achieve mainly with the help of their previous knowledge and exploiting two languages interactively. Second, L1 naturally influences the quality of further utterances, raises awareness and facilitates EFL learning. Third, especially while introducing new structure peculiar to EFL, having a conversation with students,

checking comprehension and teaching new words and structures, L1 is worthwhile and advantageous thanks to the fact that L1 use as an instrumental in the classroom saves time, simplifies the complex content and prevents misunderstanding. Fourth, cross-lingual references and code-switching serve purposeful and communicative while dealing with grammatical aspects of EFL. Fifth, L1 has been found useful for organizing the class, conveying and clarifying meaning and encouraging learning cooperatively. Sixth, reading, speaking, thinking, gaining knowledge about target language are conveyed by integrating L1 with EFL. Last of all, if used systematically, including minimal and restricted use, L1 is one of the best allies for learning a foreign language.

There is also a series of disadvantages of using L1 that should be mentioned. First, children being monolingual and acquiring their first language do necessarily not need another prior language, so L1 cannot be included as a parallel language in the EFL course. Second, successful acquisition-like learning is only possible by keeping the EFL separate from the L1. Third, in order to provide students with more samples of EFL, teachers are required to maximize the EFL use by avoiding the L1, explaining new words in EFL, miming, using pictures which can be mastered by building the EFL system separately. Fourth, *compartmentalization* and *provision* of EFL use, originally given insight by Cook (2001), support the notion that L1 is requisite to be set aside and banned from the class. Fifth, especially for daily routines, classroom situations and management, applying phrases and statements in EFL that were emphasized by textbooks and handbooks, is found beneficial. Not only is the sort of the task, but also the message rewarding for communicating properly in the target language. Sixth, there is no exactly well-defined regulation on the use, classroom rules and responsibility for successful manipulation of the two languages. For language use, providing feedback and evaluation differ among teachers. Thus, the use of L1 reduces the effectiveness and richness of the language learning environment by preventing interaction and metalinguistic competence.

Some practical recommendations for teachers, students and curriculum developers can be noted. First, as the constant use of EFL by teachers and referring it as the classroom language means ignoring the advantages and benefits of using L1 in the classroom as a mediator language, teachers should consult students' first

language, especially at the beginner levels. Second, as overusing L1 limits the input that is required for students, they should choose using simple directions that are clearly understood and used by students. Third, it would be better for teachers to use L1 judiciously by evoking students in EFL, giving instructions about the further exercises, checking comprehension and code-switching due to the facilitating potency of common structures and words. Fourth, they should take advantage of working with this innate tendency by explaining particular skills including technical and cultural content in L1 since guiding students to use L1 creatively and take an active part in group activities positively contributes to their communication skills, leading to speaking fluently in EFL. Next, in order to prevent misunderstanding and misuse, grammatical issues need to be taught by means of cross-lingual features and properties common with L1, whereas teachers should provide students with the security of L1, especially by setting and stating classroom rules. Then, in the multi-ethnic language classes, using EFL at all times is not only optional for teachers but also essential. That is because there will be several native languages that are not known by the whole class. Then, especially for beginning levels, not proficient enough to understand new information and form structure, the use of L1 leads to clearer mastering and further clarification of form and meaning. Moreover, it should be known that the use of L1 moderately reduces students' anxiety and increases their confidence and rapport with their teachers. Last of all, in contrast to the advantages, the excessive dependence and excessive use of L1 may hinder the opportunity to hear EFL leading unable to develop speaking strategies.

Further research should investigate in what ways L1 can be integrated into courses judiciously, how the use of L1 can be reduced, how and when to promote the use of target language. It is also necessary to determine the specific context for the use and non-use of L1. Moreover, it is necessary to find specific explanations for promoting learners' basic language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. Last, further research looking through students' and teachers' preferences and perceptions according to learners' background, age, mother tongue and English language proficiency would be rewarding.

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