


L2 Learners' Perceptions of Using L1 in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Most foreign or second (L2) language teaching happens in classrooms where teachers and learners share the same first language (L1), and there has been a long-standing controversy over using L1 in language teaching classrooms. Thus, the present study sought to explore English learners' perceptions about using their L1 in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. The study further aimed to investigate whether English proficiency level had any effect on learners' preferences of using L1 in English classrooms. A total of 75 EFL learners enrolled in an English preparatory program at a foundation university in Ankara voluntarily participated in the study. Data were collected using a questionnaire to determine participants' views on using their L1 in English classes. The results revealed that EFL learners supported the use of English as the only medium of instruction in EFL classrooms and English proficiency level had an effect on learners' preferences of using L1. Findings also indicated that learners with a low level of English proficiency had more positive opinions about using L1 in EFL classrooms as opposed to learners with a high level of English proficiency. On the other hand, regardless of the proficiency level, all participants agreed that they might use their L1 in the class if they really needed to do so. Another significant finding of the study was that learners' willingness to use L1 in the classroom decreased as their English proficiency level increased. In line with these findings, further recommendations were proposed regarding the place of L1 in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: L1 use, EFL learners, English proficiency level.

İngilizce Öğrenenlerin Dil Sınıflarında Ana Dil Kullanımına İlişkin Algıları

Öz

Yabancı veya ikinci dil öğretimi çoğunlukla, öğretmenlerin ve öğrencilerin aynı ana dili paylaştığı sınıflarda yapılmaktadır ve dil sınıflarında ana dil kullanımı konusunda uzun zamandır devam eden bir tartışma mevcuttur. Bu çalışmada, İngilizce öğrenenlerin dil sınıflarında ana dillerini kullanma konusundaki algıları araştırılmıştır. Ayrıca, İngilizce yeterli seviyesinin, öğrencilerin İngilizce derslerinde ana dillerini kullanma tercihleri üzerinde bir etkisi olup olmadığı da araştırılmıştır. Çalışmaya gönüllü olarak Ankara'daki bir vakıf üniversitesinde İngilizce hazırlık programında eğitim gören toplam 75 ikinci dil öğrencisi katılmıştır. Veriler, katılımcıların ana dili İngilizce derslerinde kullanma

Sending Date / Gönderim Tarihi: 26/04/2019

Acceptance Date / Kabul Tarihi: 15/11/2019

konusundaki görüşlerini belirlemek için bir anket kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Sonuçlar, ikinci dil öğrenenlerin İngilizcenin sınıflarındaki tek öğretim dili olarak kullanılmasını desteklediğini ve İngilizce yeterlik seviyesinin, öğrencilerin sınıfta ana dil kullanma tercihlerini etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur. Bulgular, aynı zamanda İngilizce yeterliği düşük olan öğrencilerin, İngilizce yeterliği yüksek olan öğrencilerin aksine, İngilizce sınıflarında ana dil kullanımı konusunda daha olumlu görüşlere sahip olduğunu göstermiştir. Diğer bir yandan da, yeterlik seviyesine bakılmaksızın, tüm katılımcılar, gerçekten ihtiyaç duymaları halinde ana dili ikinci dil öğretim sınıflarında kullanabileceklerini belirtmişlerdir. Çalışmanın önemli bir bulgusu, öğrencilerin İngilizce yeterlik düzeyleri arttıkça sınıfta ana dil kullanma isteklerinin azalmasıdır. Bu bulgular doğrultusunda ana dilin ikinci dil öğretim sınıflarındaki yeri ile ilgili önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ana dil kullanımı, ikinci dil öğrenenler, İngilizce yeterlik seviyesi.

INTRODUCTION

Some concerns have been raised about the place of first language (L1) in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Over the past decades, there has been considerable debate over whether using L1 hinders second or foreign language (L2) learning or it has a facilitate role for learners to gain L2 competence. This issue becomes even more significant in EFL classrooms where students and teachers share a common L1. Scholars have long discussed whether EFL teachers ought to exclude or include learners' L1 in the classroom (Brown, 2000). People supporting English only policy put forward theoretical arguments stating how much learners are exposed to a second language determines L2 acquisition (Miles, 2004). They believe that the more learners are exposed to L2 the more they will become equipped with a high level of L2 proficiency. The supporters of this view also state that using L1 in the classroom will limit learners' exposure to L2. Thus, using L1 has a debilitating role in EFL classrooms with regard to these arguments.

As another view, opponents of English only policy have supported the idea of using L1 in EFL classrooms due to its facilitative role (Burden, 2000; Critchley, 1999; Mitchell, 1988). They argue that using L1 in necessary conditions can facilitate EFL learners' L2 learning process by making them less anxious and more eager towards L2 learning. The supporters of this view regard L1 as a facilitator and they encourage to use L1 for certain pedagogical purposes. They especially support L1 use in EFL classrooms for building rapport and creating a relaxed atmosphere by lowering learners' affective filter. When learners' affective filter is lowered, supposedly, they will be more willing to learn target language because of feeling more self-confident and less anxious.

As mentioned before, L1 use is a significant issue especially in EFL classrooms since learners do not have many opportunities to get exposed to L2 in their real life. In this sense, if L1 use limits the amount of learners' L2 exposure, it may create serious problems for EFL learners. On the other hand, if it is used only in necessary conditions to build rapport with learners, it can help L2 learners to be more at ease in the classroom because of decreasing their language anxiety. The important point is determining the appropriate conditions of L1 use if it has a place in EFL classrooms one way or another. The reasons of L1 use can change with regard to teachers and learners. Sometimes teachers may use L1 in the classroom for a matter of class discipline. In contrast, L2 learners can choose to use L1 when they feel overwhelmed by a language task and want to call for help. These are only some conditions of L1 use in EFL classrooms. For all of these reasons, it is necessary to be aware of the conditions in which L2 instructors or learners prefer to use L1 and their aims for using it.

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the significant role of using L1 in EFL classrooms (Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Gaebler, 2014; Moore, 2013). In Turkish context, however, there is still a scarcity of research related to finding out learners' opinions regarding the place of L1 in EFL classrooms. To address this research gap, this study sought to explore EFL learners' perceptions about the language of instruction and their L1 use preferences in English lessons. In this way, it may be possible for English instructors to gain some insights into the effect of using L1 in their classes via looking at the issue from learners' perspective. The study further aimed to investigate whether English proficiency level had any effect on learners' preferences of using their L1 in EFL classrooms. To reach these purposes, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study.

1. What are English preparatory school students' preferences of medium of instruction in English lessons?
2. Do learners' preferences of using L1 differ by their proficiency level?
3. Do English preparatory school students support using L1 in English lessons?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether using L1 in EFL classrooms is beneficial for learners has attracted some attention in the related literature. Researchers have investigated this crucial dilemma in EFL classrooms considering both L2 learners' and English instructors' perspectives and via observing their actual uses of L1 (Çelik, 2008; Miles, 2004; Paker & Karaağaç, 2015; Sen, 2010; Sharaeai, 2012; Timuçin & Baytar, 2015) or only L2 instructors' ideas on that matter (Blackman, 2014; Debrelı, 2016; Kayaoğlu, 2012; Karimian & Mohammadi, 2015; Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014). For instance, Alshehri (2017) has recently investigated EFL instructors' views on using L1 in L2 classes and found out that they use L1 for some pedagogical purposes like explaining unknown vocabulary items to L2 learners in their classes (p. 29). Being in line with the current study, Debrelı and Oyman (2016) investigated the effects of demographic background and L2 learners' proficiency level on their perceptions of the use of Turkish in English classrooms and they found out that students having a lower proficiency level in L2 have more positive opinions regarding L1 use (p. 148). Additionally, Karakaş (2016) explored English instructors' views concerning the use of L1 in English medium programs and found out that lecturers were supportive of L1 use in their classes for certain aims (p. 250).

The use of different L1 and L2s other than English was also investigated with specific focus on the amount and purposes of L1 use and its effects in German (Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Chavez, 2016) or Swedish (Lehti-Eklund, 2012) or Spanish (Thompson & Harrison, 2014) as foreign language classrooms. In addition, Carson and Kashihara (2012) investigated students' L1 preferences in different language situations and whether students' L2 proficiency level affected their preferences of L1 use in L2 classes. The findings of their study revealed that as students' proficiency level in L2 increased, they had more negative views about using L1 in L2 classes. Kelilo (2012) also investigated both L2 learners' and teachers' preferences of L1 use and reached generally positive views about using L1 in EFL classrooms (p. 44).

In some studies, negative or hindering effects of overuse of L1 were prevailed by minimizing learners' exposure to L2 (Almoayidi, 2018; Fernandez, 2015; Khati, 2011, p. 48). To this end, Littlewood and Yu (2011) focused on the ways of maximizing the use of target language in EFL classrooms without downsizing the use of L1 for developing foreign language learning (p. 73). Additionally, Pan and Pan (2010) argued that the logical and appropriate use of L1 could be helpful to EFL learners and teachers. In this sense, instructors may need some training on the effective use of L1 in EFL classrooms. Within this context, Mansor (2017) found such a result in a dissertation and mentioned EFL instructors' need for training about using mother tongue in the classroom only when it is really necessary (p. 3). As seen in this review of the related literature, there are some contradicting research results showing the need for further research in L2 teaching field.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 75 ($N = 75$; females: 38, males: 37) EFL learners enrolled in an English preparatory program at a foundation university in Ankara voluntarily participated in the study. Participants were from two different English proficiency levels as A2 ($N = 45$) and B1 ($N = 30$). Their age ranged from 18 to 22 with a mean value of 18.4. The sampling methodology was convenience sampling. Demographic background of the learners was generally similar in terms of English learning experience. They attended English courses offered in regular high schools in Turkey. Most of these students did not have any L2 learning experience abroad. Their first language was Turkish. The students participated in the study had different majors since they were studying in an English preparatory school.

Instrument

Sharaeai's (2012) survey was adapted to gather data about English preparatory school students' views related to the use of Turkish in their classrooms while learning English. The survey originally had two parts and the second part of the survey was used because of being more related to the specific aims of this study. It has 10 statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree."

Research Design and Procedure

This study was carried out using a quantitative research design. A survey methodology was implemented and the data were collected using a questionnaire. Participants provided their opinions regarding their L1 use in English classes. Sociodemographic information was also collected via a survey which was administered to the participants at the end of a regular class hour with the permission of their instructors in the classroom.

Data Analysis

All the data were fed into the computer and analyzed via IBM SPSS 21. The quantitative data was analyzed by using descriptive statistics to check if there was any problem in the data. For each item in the survey, the frequency analysis was conducted. Normality assumptions were found to be violated according to the normality tests of Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov. Due to the violation of normal distribution and having two groups of students with two English proficiency levels, Mann Whitney U test, which is the non-parametric equivalent of independent samples t-test, was conducted to find the answers of the research questions.

FINDINGS

The present study yielded some significant findings regarding English preparatory school students' preferences of L1 use in EFL classrooms and whether or not English proficiency level had any effect on their choices. This section presents study results which are structured along with the research questions.

Findings Related to Learners' Preferences of Medium of Instruction

According to the Mann-Whitney U Test results shown in Table 1, there was no significant difference between A2 level students' ($Md=4$, $n=45$) and B1 level students ($Md=4$, $n=30$), $U= 580.500$, $z= -1.057$, $p= .290$ preferences of the language of instruction in EFL

classrooms. All students regardless of their English proficiency level seemed to prefer English as the sole medium of instruction in the classroom.

Table 1

L2 Learners' Preferences of Medium of Instruction

	N	Item 3
A2 Level Students	45	4
B1 Level Students	30	4
Mann-Whitney U		580.5
Z		-1.057
p		.290

Item 3: I think my English class should have an "English Only Policy." (This means only English is allowed in the English classroom.)

Findings about Proficiency Level Related Differences in Learners' L1 Use Preferences

As shown in Table 2, a Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistical significant difference between A2 level students' ($Md = 4$, $n = 45$) preferences of L1 use in EFL classes and B1 level students' views ($Md = 2$, $n = 30$), in item 8, $U = 457.500$, $z = -2.449$, $p = .014$ with medium effect size $r = .3$ and in item 9, $U = 371.500$, $z = -3.048$, $p = .021$. Results indicated that A2 level students supported using L1 in the classroom as opposed to B1 level students.

Table 2

L2 Learners' Preferences of L1 Use in EFL Classes

MD	N	Item 8	Item 9
A2 Level Students	45	4	4
B1 Level Students	30	2	2
Mann-Whitney U		457.5	371.5
Z		-2.449	-3.048
p		.014	.021

Item 8: Speaking my first language with my classmates between and during class activities should be okay as long as the course is not a speaking class.

Item 9: I think I speak in my first language more often than I speak English in English class.

Table 3

Proficiency Level Effect on Learners' Language Related Preferences

MD (students)	N	Item 1	Item 2	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 10
A2 level	45	4	3	3	4	3	3	3
B1 level	30	4	3	4	4	2	3	2
Mann-Whitney U		531.5	539.0	371.5	659.5	394.5	606.0	355.5
Z		-1.673	-1.504	-2.449	-.176	-3.128	-.777	-3.600
P		.094	.133	.002	.860	.002	.437	.000

Item 1: In English class, it is best to have a teacher who can understand my first language.

Item 2: I would prefer to sit next to a classmate who speaks my first language in English class.

Item 4: As my English improves, I am becoming more comfortable speaking only English in English class.

Item 5: I want to be able to speak my first language in English class when I feel I need to.

Item 6: It's not important to speak only English in class as long as I am completing the course tasks.

Item 7: Using dictionaries and resources in the first language should be allowed in English class.

Item 10: Having to speak English only in class makes me feel nervous.

If the median values of items stated in Table 3 for A2 level students ($n=45$) and B1 level students ($n=30$) are analyzed, it can be observed that they have similar values indicating no significant proficiency level related difference on learners' beliefs. However, there are some important points to be further explained. For instance, in items 6 and 10, A2 level students seemed undecided but B1 level students disagreed with those items. Regarding items 6 and 10 for students from A2 level ($Md=3$, $n=45$) and from B1 level ($Md=2$, $n=30$), B1 level students were not found to be feeling nervous in English only classes and they seemed to be more aware of the importance of speaking English in the class except for task completion. In addition, both levels were found to agree with items 1 and 5, so for both levels, it can be stated that if L2 learners really need to use their L1, they have a desire to use it in the class. Students from both levels also preferred to have a teacher who understands their L1.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated English learners' perceptions about using their L1 in EFL classrooms as well as the effect of English proficiency level on their preferences of L1 use. To this end, the study results provided some important insights into English learners' perceptions regarding this matter. Based on these results, some implications were drawn about whether or not using L1 has detrimental or facilitative influences on L2 learners. The overall results of the study showed that students with a low level of English proficiency had more positive views about the use of L1 in English classes. In contrast, learners with a high level of English proficiency did not support using L1 in their English lessons, which is in line with the results of some previously conducted studies (Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Debreli & Oyman, 2016). On the other hand, learners with A2 and B1 proficiency levels stated that they might use their L1 in English classes if they really felt the need to do so. Thus, it was found out that especially students with a low level of L2 proficiency might need the appropriate use of L1 in L2 classes, which is consistent with the findings of Pan and Pan (2010, p. 93).

The fact that there is a proficiency level related difference in English learners' perceptions of L1 use in the classroom should be taken into consideration. For one thing, as learners' proficiency level in L2 increases, it seems that their needs for using L1 in L2 classes decrease. It may result from the fact that L2 learners' self confidence in using target language increases as their L2 proficiency improves, which can be interpreted as the decline in their use of L1 in the class. In this sense, foreign language teachers should take students' proficiency level into consideration while deciding on whether or not to use L1 in their lessons.

Especially in the classrooms consisting of students with a high level of English proficiency, it can be better to limit the use of L1 to increase the exposure to the target language. In lower proficiency level classes, teachers should be even more careful about the amount of L1 use. Students with a low level of English proficiency are more prone to use their L1 when they feel that their L2 competence is not enough to complete a language task. They can also use L1 to cope with anxiety arousing situations. Learners may regard their L1 as a saving boat in these problematic conditions. In such cases, possible hindering effects of the overuse of L1 in L2 classes should be recognized as mentioned in some previous studies (Almoayidi, 2018, p. 375; Fernandez, 2015, p. 191).

Regardless of the proficiency level, all participants asserted that the target language should be used as the language of instruction in EFL classrooms, suggesting that L2 learners are aware of the importance of L2 exposure. It has great importance especially for EFL learners regarding their limited or no exposure to the target language in real life. Overall results indicated that L2 learners supported only limited amount of L1 use in L2 classrooms when it is really necessary. As Littlewood and Yu (2011) suggested, increasing the use of target language in L2 classrooms with benefiting from the suitable use of L1 was an important implication of the present study. As the last remark, it can be stated that the study helps to interpret the place of L1 in EFL classrooms in Turkish context and to understand L2 learners' perspectives regarding the issue. It can also assist English instructors to be more careful while using L1 in their classes.

CONCLUSION

When the place of L1 in EFL classroom is explored, the reasons of using it and the conditions in which using L1 can be beneficial or harmful for L2 learners should be determined for context specific purposes. In some contexts, it can have a detrimental effect on learners if L1 is used more frequently than required. However, in some other contexts, it can help creating a more relaxed atmosphere in the class via lowering learners' anxiety levels. For these reasons, context specific nature of language teaching should be kept in mind while evaluating the place of L1 in L2 classrooms. This study has important implications regarding the use of L1 in English teaching classrooms in Turkish context. If the appropriate conditions of L1 use in EFL contexts are determined, they can be implemented for English teaching purposes. English instructors' expectations regarding their students' use of L1 and L2 can be reformed by using the results of this study because teachers' expectations can actually influence L2 learners' real use of both their L1 and the target language L2 classes.

As for the recommendations for further research, incorporating students from more different proficiency levels can be quite beneficial. Instructor preferences of L1 use can also be investigated to observe the relationship between their own and L2 learners' language related preferences. In this way, it may be possible to evaluate both sides as L2 instructors and learners on that matter. Additionally, determining the reasons of instructors' use of L1 in EFL classrooms can provide more insights concerning the place of L1 in L2 teaching environments. Like any other studies in social and educational sciences, this study also has some limitations. The lack of qualitative data can be mentioned as one of them. In this sense, interviews with learners could be carried out to understand the logic behind their views about using L1 in EFL classrooms. It would also be better to increase the number of participants to reach more generalizable results.

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