

TEACHERS' FIRST LANGUAGE USE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASS ROOM ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate teachers' belief and perceptions about First Language (L1) use in English as First Additional Language (FAL) in a learning environment. This is a descriptive survey in which seventy two Second Language (L2) teachers from Motheo district in South Africa volunteered to participate in this study. A questionnaire which probed into beliefs and perceptions about employing learners' L1 (Sesotho) in L2 (English) learning was used to collect data. The data obtained showed that L2 teachers used L1 mainly to provide feedback; teach new vocabulary; explain grammar; build rapport; manage the class; give individual help to learners and save time in lengthy task explanations.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, first language, multilingualism, first additional language.*

1. Introduction

The recent findings of L2 studies examining the use of L1 in L2 learning studies undermine the strong L2 – only attitude advocated regularly in the policy documents. In the process of teaching a second language, the teacher's use of mother tongue can influence the learner's acquisition of the target language. The existing body of L2 research in the area of L1 use has shown positive effect of L1 use on prompting L2 learning (e.g. Atkinson, 1987; Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Oguro, 2011; etc.).

Nevertheless, maximal use of L2 is encouraged due to the fact that for most of L2 learner's language classroom is the only context they have at their disposal for L2 exposure (Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014). It is also claimed that if language teachers have recourse to learners' L1, the amount of comprehensible L2 input decreases (Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014). Although L2 teachers are in favour of minimal L1 use, in practice L1 is used more widely than L2 teachers ponder ideal for prompting L2 learning (Oguro, 2011).

Mohebbi & Alavi (2014) point out L1 use as a natural spontaneous cognitive strategy. On the same attitude, Sampson (2012) avers that prohibiting L1 use in language classroom might be detrimental to L2 development. Grim (2010) considers L1 use as a scaffolding instrument for L2 learners which might result in more result in more effective L2 output. In a similar manner of research, code switching, defined as a systematic use of L1 within a conversation or utterance, is treated as a competence, even an advance one, which permits the bilingual speakers to negotiate more fluently (Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014). To be exact, code-switching requires competence in all languages involved, and it is simplistic to consider it as simple mixture of two languages (Cook, 2008). In most cases, code switching is observed whenever bilingual speakers speak to each other.

In summing up, recent studies investigating the use of L1 in L2 learning from different perspectives have provided support for the effectiveness of employing learners' L1 in enhancing L2 learning. Nevertheless, there is a limited L2 research investigating the belief and perceptions of L2 teachers about L1 use in English as a second language context. The purpose of this study is to inquire into L2 teachers' perceptions and beliefs in English as a second language context to find out L2 teachers' perceptions about potential functions of L1 in mastering L2 in English as second language context in South Africa.

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1.1. Functions of learners' first language in a second language classroom

According to Mohebbi & Alavi (2014: 59), teachers generally employ learners' L1 for three main purposes, namely instructional, i.e. facilitating comprehension, explaining grammar, new lexical items and concepts, managerial such as classroom management, providing feedback, and for affective purposes, particularly encouraging and providing comfort for learners.

Wilkerson (2008) in Mohebbi & Alavi (2014) observed that teachers employed L1 mainly to control the speed of classroom interactions and activities eliminate waiting or lag time and restrict turn-taking by learners. Additionally, the teachers' resorted to L1 to avoid ambiguity, save time, establish or assert authority, and manage classroom.

1.2. Second language teachers' perception about learners' first language use in second language classroom

Mohebbi & Alavi (2014) observed that there is a gap in L2 research inquiring into teachers' and learners' perceptions and beliefs about employing L1 in L2 learning classroom environment. Lavine (2003) in Mohebbi & Alavi (2014) encourage the teachers to accept that L1 apparently serves numerous effective functions in L2 classes and ignoring the crucial role of L1 would appear to be a futile exercise. It also stated that students should be assigned an active role in striking balance between target and first language use in classroom.

Crawford (2004) surveyed the language teachers' attitudes towards L1 use in Australia. She argued that despite the finding that the teachers' own proficiency exerted some effect on levels of L1 -L2 use, improving teachers' proficiency will not by itself bring changes due to the fact that even highly proficient native speakers resort to L1 at almost all level of the course.

2. Methodology

This study was undertaken in different private schools in Motheo district, Free State province in South Africa (i.e. English as First Additional Language); the main focus of the syllabus is on reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Teachers and learners are required to shy away from using L1 in the classroom environment.

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted in various private schools in Free State province in South Africa. The questionnaire was distributed to more than hundred -twenty L2 teachers and they were asked to participate in the study. The participants were forty females and thirty-two males ranging in age from twenty-one to thirty-nine. Thirty-eight of the participants held a bachelor's degree in teaching English as First Additional Language (FAL), English literature and linguistics; ten of the participants held bachelor's and master's degree in other majors who had learnt English in private language schools.

2.2. Instruments

The data was obtained through two instruments, a biodata questionnaire and a questionnaire developed to inquire L2 teachers' beliefs and perceptions about L1 use in L2 teaching.

3. Results

The data obtained through the teachers' perception and beliefs questionnaire were analysed to find the teachers' perception and belief about using learners' L1 in English as a FAL context. Below is the Table 1 summarises the main findings of the data analysis in favour of L1 use. While on the other side, Table 2 summarises the main finding of data analysis against First Language use.

Table 1. The main findings of the data analysis in favour of L1 use.

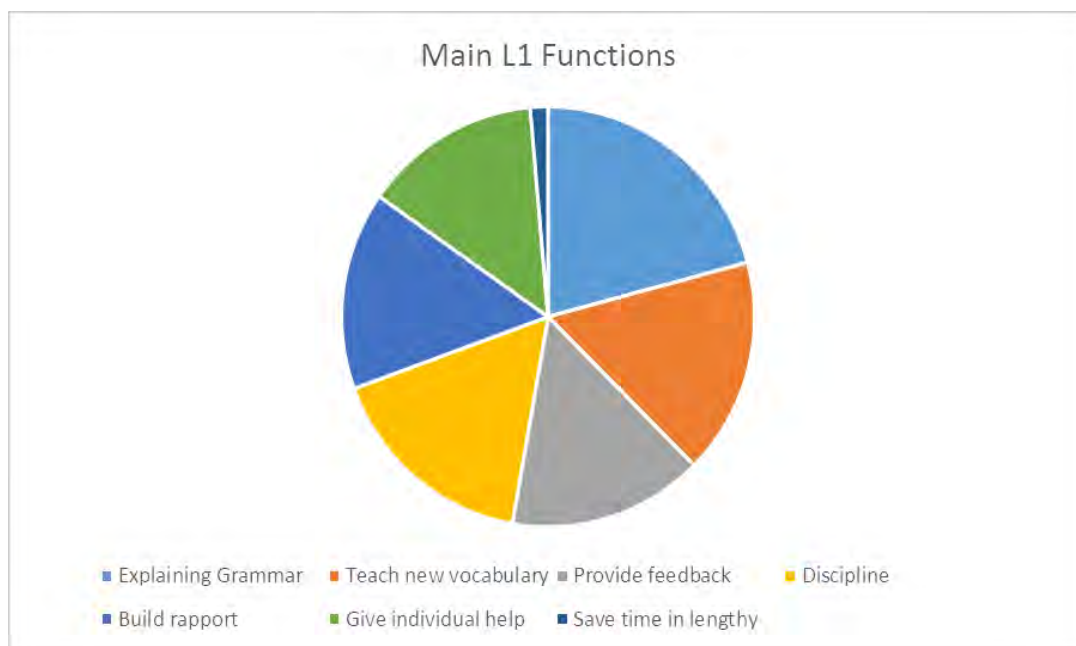
First Language functions in Second language Classroom	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I use learners' L1 to provide feedback	54.16	40.27	-	-	5.55
I use learners' L1 in dealing with discipline problems in class	69.44	15.27	6.94	4.16	4.16
I use learners' L1 in giving individual help	51.38	13.88	-	-	34.72
I use learners' L1 to teach new vocabulary	48.6	22.22	23.61	-	5.55
I use learners' L1 to build rapport with learners	43.05	22.22	29.61	4.16	1.38
I employ learners' L1 in giving personal comments	81.94	15.27	2.77	-	-
I use learners' L1 to explain grammar	77.77	12.5	8.33	-	-

Table 2. The main findings of data analysis against First Language use.

First Language functions in Second language Classroom	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I use learners' L1 to encourage and comfort learners	6.94	15.27	16.66	26.38	34.72
I use learners' L1 in administrative issues like exam announcement	29.16	9.72	2.77	34.72	23.6
I use learners' L1 in making contrast between L1 and L2	8.33	9.72	9.72	6.94	65.27
I use learners' L1 to explain instructions for assignment or projects	18.83	13.88	15.27	5.55	40.27
I use learners' L1 in giving written corrective feedback on learners' compositions.	6.94	2.77	18.05	11.11	61.11

Figure 1 shows the main functions of Learners' of learners' L1 based on the data obtained through the questionnaire.

Figure 1. Main findings regarding the functions of L2 learners' L1.



4. Discussion and conclusion

This study specifically probed, into teachers' perception and beliefs with respect to using L2 learners' L1 in FAL class environment. The results showed that teachers employed L2 learners' L1 mainly to teach new grammatical lexical items provide feedback and explain learners' mistakes. Teachers also took advantage of learners' L1 to build rapport with learners. The findings of the study emphasise the importance of learners' L1 in enhancing L2 learning, in particular in L2 vocabulary and grammar teaching.

Amazingly, teachers' responses indicated a number of findings which are in contrast with previous studies. In contrast to the findings of the studies to date investigating the L1 use in L2 learning, most teachers expressed that they never fall back on learners' L1 to explain instructions for assignment or projects (Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014). Furthermore, they asserted that they never employ learners' L1 in encouraging learners and in giving written corrective feedback. It can also be argued that learners' L1 has the potential to prompt L2 learning and its use should be encouraged. But this does not mean that L1 use should be used expansively. It is argued that learners' L1, as an invaluable asset, need to be employed effectively prudently. Second language teachers should be encouraged to maintain a steadiness between L1 and L2 use in L2 learning environment.

There are some limitations in this study that should be acknowledge and that could serve as lines of future studies in this field. Apart from these limitations, the study holds substantial implications for language teachers, particularly in teaching English as a second language context. Second language teachers need to consider L2 learning classroom environment as multilingual social space in which teachers and

learners take advantage of “dynamic, creative, and pedagogically effective use of both the target language and the learners’ L1 (s)” (Mohebbi & Alavi, 2014, p.67).

To sum up this discussion, it is mandatory to stress that teachers play the most crucial role in L1 use, Mohebbi & Alavi (2014), observed that majority of teachers opted for L1 considerably in spite of their training and the policies stated clearly sanctioning exclusively target language use.

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