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The use and functions of mother tongue in EFL classes

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Abstract

The use of mother tongue (L1) in foreign language classrooms is inevitable. In this paper, the use and functions of it in various classes have been analyzed and discussed. The purpose of the present study was to find out to what extent the instructors in the School of Foreign Languages at Pamukkale University use mother tongue in their classes. We attempted to find out whether their mother tongue use changes according to different variables, for which functions they use it, whether they are aware of the amount and the functions, whether the instructors are satisfied with the amount of L1 they use, and whether their students are satisfied with it, and whether this satisfaction differs according to the amount used by their instructors. The study was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages at Pamukkale University, and it was based on both qualitative and quantitative research designs. The participants were 20 English instructors working in the School of Foreign Languages and their 286 students. The data were collected through classroom recordings, questionnaires that were administered both to the instructors and the students, and interviews were conducted with all of the instructors and randomly chosen 39 students. Our data have revealed that mother tongue is an inseparable part of language teaching, and it actually has different functions like “rapport building purposes”, “making the topic/meaning clear (by giving examples, explaining, making extra explanations, etc.)”, “explaining difficult concepts or ideas”, etc. It was also found out that both the instructors and the students were aware of the importance of using the target language as much as possible in the classes, however, they could not deny the need of mother tongue from time to time.

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1. Introduction

The use of mother tongue (L1) has been an inevitable part of second or foreign language teaching in various contexts where both the teachers and the learners have the same mother tongue. Although it was strictly prohibited at different times according to different language teaching methods such as Direct Method and Audio-lingual Method, it is allowed in various methods and approaches such as Natural Approach, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Learning, etc. Larsen-Freeman (2000, pp. 101-102) claims that “the native language of the students is used in the classroom in order to enhance the security of the students, to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and to make the meanings of the target language words clear.” Having various educational background, most teachers are uneasy about the use of mother tongue in the classes and cannot decide whether it is a good idea to use it or not, or if it is going to be used, when, why and for what purposes.

In fact, the use of mother tongue may contribute to language learning process in various occasions in the learning-teaching process; however, the excessive use of it may result in too much dependence on it, which is less desired outcome. According to Tang (2002), moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue is helpful and can facilitate the learning and teaching of the target language. Schweers (1999, p.7) asserts that “starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English.” In various studies it has been reported that the use of L1 is used for different purposes in EFL or ESL classes: explaining the grammar, giving instructions, helping students/checking them, correcting the activities (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Greggio & Gil, 2007; Patel & Jain, 2008). Next, teachers use L1 for the purpose of motivating students, helping students cope with some problematic situations, explaining some grammatical patterns (Duff & Polio, 1990), explaining their ideas in writing composition or in oral work, and translating the reading passages (Patel and Jain, 2008; Nation, 2003). Moreover, using L1 helps maintain class discipline, build rapport and reduce social distance with students (Nation, 2003; Jingxia, 2009; Ramos, 2005). According to Moghadam et al. (2012), teachers use code switching to check understanding, to clarify and to socialize. In addition, it is used to give the meaning of unknown vocabulary (Çelik, 2003; Şenel, 2010), which is found “economical and is a direct route to a word’s meaning” (Thornbury, 1999, p.78). Atkinson (1987) focuses on time saving aspect of using L1 as well as the others; “a prompt ‘How do you say X in English?’ can often be less time consuming and can involve less potential ambiguity than other methods of eliciting such as visuals, mime, ‘creating a need’, etc.” (p. 243). In addition, according to Yıldırım and Mersinligil (2000) it arouses students’ interest towards the lesson.

However, the use of L1 should not be exaggerated because the more the students are exposed to the target language, the better they will learn it. Atkinson (1987) points out the danger of overuse of the mother tongue in language classes which will lead to the translation of most language items into L1. Nation (2003) warns that using the mother tongue in the classroom reduces the amount of input and the opportunity of practice. Furthermore, Cook (2001) points out the importance of modelling the target language and encouraging L2 use.

It is a fact that teachers may use the mother tongue in various situations for different purposes. Therefore, this study has attempted to discover all these issues by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. For this purpose we had some research questions as follows:

- How much mother tongue (L1) do the instructors use in the classes and in which situations, and are they aware of it?
- Is the instructors’ use of L1 affected by different variables?
 - Level of class
 - Content of the course (Writing, reading, core language, listening & speaking).
 - Instructors’ educational background
 - Instructors’ experience
- What are the beliefs of the instructors regarding the use of L1 in the foreign language classrooms?
 - Are these beliefs and the applications in the classes consistent?
 - Do these beliefs differ according to the instructor related variables?
 - Instructors’ experience.
 - Instructors’ educational background.
 - Do these beliefs differ according to the content of the course?

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