



First and target language use in public language education for young learners: Longitudinal evidence from Mexican secondary-school classrooms



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ABSTRACT

Reforms in public education favour the introduction of English as a foreign language at a young age. These reforms aim to help young learners achieve a high level of communicative performance in English by the end of public education. In language classrooms, the meaning-oriented use of English in teacher discourse can potentially facilitate language production and comprehension among learners and thereby provide language acquisition opportunities. This quantitative, descriptive study examined the use of English and Spanish in teacher discourse in terms of amount and purpose in Mexican secondary-school classrooms, where learners were completing the last language learning cycle in the national curriculum. Over two months, 45 h of regular classroom instruction were video-recorded in nine schools across five geographical areas of Southeast Mexico for analysis. The results indicate that teacher L1 overreliance and a lack of communicative purpose for the use of the L2 constitute shared and systematic features of public language pedagogy for young learners in the observed classrooms. These results are congruent with those from other international contexts and raise concerns about the effectiveness of language teaching to help young learners become competent users of English through public education.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, educational reforms in many countries ranging from South Korea to Mexico have reinforced the state-sanctioned and global importance of learning English as a foreign language to enhance the future personal and professional life of learners (Giannikas, 2011; Kang, 2008; Sali, 2014; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). Despite these ambitious language educational reforms, the examinations of English language learning and teaching in different parts of the world show that public education has not yet attained its goals of improving the communicative abilities of English language learners (Giannikas, 2011; Kang, 2008; Sali, 2014; Padilla & Espinoza, 2015). Some of this can be tied to the type of instruction students

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receive as well as teacher use of the target language. Reports of regular English language education for young learners in public classrooms in Spain (White, Muñoz, & Collins, 2007), French Canada (Jean & Simard, 2011), Greece (Giannikas, 2011), Korea (Liu, Ahn, Baek, & Han, 2004), and Mexico (Izquierdo et al., 2014), for instance, indicate that teachers still favour the teaching of formal linguistic aspects, often with little attention to communication.

Given the goals of language education reforms, the meaning-oriented use of the target language in teachers' discourse can create valuable opportunities that help learners develop control over the target language (Butzkamm, 2003; Macaro, 2001). In Canadian classrooms, for example, young learners have exhibited target language production patterns that are consistent with those identified in teacher discourse for instruction delivery, subject-matter discussion, and classroom management (see Collins, Trofimovich, White, Cardoso, & Horst, 2009; Lyster, 2007). In other contexts, adult university learners are also known to produce target language patterns that mirror those of teacher discourse (Kaplan, 1987; Ohta, 1999). Although teacher-learner discourse emulation could result from unconscious learning, learners seem to identify language patterns in teacher discourse, and consciously resort to this information to achieve communication in the target language (Izquierdo & Collins, 2008).

From a psycholinguistic perspective, these findings demonstrate that teacher target language use constitutes an opportunity to provide learners with language exposure through teacher-student interaction (Collins et al., 2009; Macaro, 2001). Moreover, from a socio-affective perspective, teacher target language use might enhance learners' perception that, in the classroom, the target language can and should be used for genuine communication (Polio & Duff, 1994), provide learners with a sense of accomplishment in their communicative abilities (Giannikas, 2011), and promote positive learning attitudes (Mora, Lengeling, Rubio, Crawford, & Goodwin, 2011).

In order to determine the extent to which teacher discourse could provide young learners with valuable exposure to English in public education, this study then examines the meaning-oriented use of the target language in Mexican secondary-school classrooms over an extended period of the school year. As is the case in many other parts of the world, through recent curriculum reforms, Mexico's Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación*, SE) has emphasized that public education should help learners become responsible world citizens with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be effective social interlocutors in English (SE, 2011). To this end, a curricular initiative introduced English from pre-school Grade 3, when children are approximately five years of age, through secondary-school Grade 3, when they are approximately 14 years old (SE, 2011). The Ministry of Education (SE, 2011) states that, by the end of the public secondary education, learners' English language communicative competence should reach the B1 benchmark of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (<http://www.commonframework.org>). Within this context, in an attempt to gather representative and generalizable data regarding public language education for young learners, this large-scale longitudinal study examines the quantity and purpose of the use of Spanish and English in teacher discourse during 45 h of regular language instruction in Grade-3 secondary-school classrooms located in five areas in the Southeast of Mexico.

2. Teacher use of the first and target language in second language classrooms

In second language classrooms as well as in educational research, teacher use of learners' first languages (L1) has long been a contentious issue (Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Butzkamm, 2003). Some authors take a cautious position, contending that L1 use might diminish learner opportunities to acquire the L2 (Turnbull, 2001). Others advocate for "judicious" L1 use, arguing that it enhances learners' social, affective, and cognitive learning processes (Macaro, 2001). Some others are still debating what constitutes "judicious" use of the L1 (Edstrom, 2006). While educational researchers continue to weigh the pros and cons, teachers do, in fact, use the L1 in elementary classrooms (Giannikas, 2011), secondary schools, (Liu et al., 2004; Sali, 2014), language-institutes (Ghorbani, 2011), and university language classrooms (Mora et al., 2011). The use of the L1 in L2 classrooms appears to be a common phenomenon in contexts where learners and teachers share the L1. As the literature reviewed in this section will show, teacher language use seems to have several influences including the purpose of the teacher discourse and learning context.

In language classrooms, important issues need to be considered including the quantity and purpose of L1 and L2 use (Edstrom, 2006; Giannikas, 2011; Macaro, 2001). The matter of language use has been extensively explored in university settings across different foreign languages, different stages of a lesson, various periods of time, and through different research designs (see Edstrom, 2006; Ghorbani, 2011; Loewen, 2009; Mora et al., 2011; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). Moreover, research has examined a range of learning contexts, from conversational lessons to classes with varied language foci (Edstrom, 2006; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005), native and non-native teachers of the L2 (Loewen, 2009), and instructors with varying degrees of teaching expertise (Campa & Nassaji, 2009). Findings from these university context studies show that the amount of L1/L2 use varies across classrooms and lessons (Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Edstrom, 2006; Duff & Polio, 1990; Loewen, 2009). L1 use occurs in particular moments of classroom interaction, and serves different purposes: setting objectives, establishing lesson goals, encouraging L2 production, clarifying ambiguous content, and building rapport (Edstrom, 2006; Ghorbani, 2011; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). Language choice can be influenced by learner interest in the content, L2 proficiency, and teacher-student rapport (Carson & Kashira, 2012; Edstrom, 2006). In addition, the lesson tasks and materials can lead to different attitudes towards L1 and L2 use (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Bruen & Kelly, 2014; Carson & Kashira, 2012; Mora et al., 2011).

Research in public classrooms with young learners is less frequent. In these educational settings, the amount of L1/L2 use also varies across classrooms with some studies demonstrating that infrequent L2 use characterizes teacher talk in these contexts. For example, in an observational study of L2 use in high school classrooms in South Korea, Liu et al. (2004) observed

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