

THE USE OF L1 IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The role of L1 in instructed English learning has been the subject of much controversy. Some teachers have the opinion that L1 may be used under certain limitations and others feel that it should not be allowed at all. The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the use L1 in promoting English learning by observing and interviewing five kindergarten teachers in Bandar Lampung. The result showed that L1 has a valuable role to play in the English classroom. Teaching English for young learners requires teachers to teach efficiently and appropriately. It indicates that the L1 gains more benefits by incorporating the students' L1 as a learning tool and a facilitator for an efficient teaching. L1 is most useful at beginning and low levels (in this case for kindergarten students).

Key words: first language, second language, young EFL learners.

Abstrak

Peran L1 dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris masih menjadi kontroversi. Beberapa guru memiliki pendapat L1 dapat digunakan dalam situasi dan kondisi tertentu dan guru lainnya merasa bahwa L1 tidak diperbolehkan sama sekali digunakan dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui efektivitas dari penggunaan L1 dalam mempromosikan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris dengan mengamati dan mewawancarai lima guru TK di Bandar Lampung. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa L1 memiliki peran yang penting dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di kelas. Pengajaran bahasa Inggris untuk anak mengharuskan para guru mengajar secara efisien dan tepat. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa L1 memberikan manfaat lebih karena perannya sebagai sarana belajar dan fasilitator untuk mengajar efisien. Penggunaan L1 sangat berguna untuk pembelajaran bahasa Inggris terutama bagi siswa TK atau kelas rendah lainnya.

Kata kunci: bahasa pertama, bahasa kedua, pembelajar anak-anak

INTRODUCTION

Research studies on students L2 acquisition indicate that students exposed to more than one language at an early age develop the new grammatical systems in a natural manner, only by being exposed to the languages. Language teachers have been debating whether they should use the L1 in the L2 in their teaching. Some teachers give the opinion that L1 should not be allowed in order to exposure the target language and others think that L1 can be used under certain conditions.

The use of L1 and L2

The issue of whether or not to use the L1 in the L2 classroom is complex. There are some studies done on what use of L1 is made in the classroom. Prodromou (2002) carried out research into the perceptions of three hundreds Greek students regarding L1 use in the monolingual classroom at three levels that are beginner, intermediate and advanced. He tried to investigate the reaction and attitude of students with different levels of proficiency. He found that the L1 was used for certain procedures for example, explaining difficult concepts, checking comprehension, raising confidence, explaining the rationale of language learning activities, error analysis, or vocabulary clarification. The findings showed that students at lower levels showed more tendencies to accept the use of L1 while for higher level students, they have a negative attitude toward the use of L1 in their classroom. Dujmovic (2007) examined the attitudes of his hundred EFL students. He concluded that his students responded positively to the use of L1 in L2 contexts and showed their interests as well. Harmer (2002) claims that learners resort to the mother tongue when the choice of task is not compatible with their target language level. It is natural for them to use L1 to communicate, while the teacher does not create situations that would make it natural for them to use L2. Papamihiel (2001) claims that L1 has aided in l2 skills in a way that the use of the former is a support for the acquisition of the later. Schweers (1999) investigated the use of L1 in his monolingual Spanish-speaking classes in Puerto Rico. He found that the use of L1 in the classroom was useful. The L1 can be used to explain difficult concepts, to make the situation more comfortable, to check comprehension, to define new vocabulary items and to switch the language when they fell lost and not confident. He encouraged teachers to incorporate the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, and suggested that by starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. Reineman (2001) proposes that there is no hard fast rule for when L1 should be allowed or prohibited in the classroom. She said that the used of L1 should be allowed conditionally. When communicating ideas that are abstracts, L1 can be used. However, when introducing new vocabulary, in which can be expressed through drawings, pantomimes, noises, etc, the L2 or target language can be used. Nevertheless, students should not be allowed to use their L1 too much. There are some factors that should be taken into account when a teacher should decide the use of L1 in L2 classroom (Susan

Connick-Hirtz, 2001): (1) What is the learner's first language; (2) What is the learner's age; (3) Are we teaching beginners of advanced levels?; (4) What is the ration of students/teaching time per one class; (5) How long is the learner going to study the second language; (6) What are his/her learning purposes; (7) Is it a one nationality or mixed nationality group; (8) What is the institution's pedagogical policy; (9) What kind of educational background does the learner have; (10) In what kind of social context is the teaching of L2 taking place?

The characteristics of young learners

In UK, foreign languages are not taught until 11 years unlike all other subjects. A European example is Germany, where in some states, foreign languages start from grade 5. In the case of China, L2 teaching starts at Primary 4 (10 years old) in urban areas, however, some schools in rural areas cannot meet the requirement, it may not commence as late at Junior High (12 years old). In Japan, foreign languages are not includes in the National Curriculum. In Indonesia curriculum namely School-Based Curriculum (KTSP), English as stated in Standard of Content (Minister of National Education Regulation No 22, 2006) is learnt at primary two hours in a week (as Local Content or Muatan Lokal (MuLok) for grade IV, V, and VI), at junior and senior high school four hours in a week except for Language Program in SMA – five hours in a week. As stated in Permendiknas, English is a subject that is not compulsory to be taught in kindergarten. However, the study of English at an early age in Indonesia has increased starting in either kindergarten level or lower grade in primary level. This phenomenon has made Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) become popular.

The definition of young learners according to Cameron (2001) is children whose age are under 14 years old, while according to Rixon in 1999 is children between the ages of about 5 years old to 12 years old. One of the factors to be successful in language learning is young age. The reasons are because the brain is more adaptable before puberty than after, and acquisition of languages is possible without self-consciousness at an early age and also because young learners have more opportunities than adult learners. Young learners learn the L1 by being immersed in the language, by making sense of the language around them, and by interacting with adults (parents, family, and teachers) and with their friends. Young learners are also

potentially equipped to learn more than one language and some of them are bilingual because their families have talked to them in more than one language. Young learners generally are not consciously interested in language for its own sake and usually tend to direct their interest towards things that are easy for them to understand. They possess a natural desire to participate actively in the social environment around them so it helps them to learn new languages. Harmer (2001) stated that young learners respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words. They also often learn indirectly rather than directly. Young learners learn everything around them. Moreover, according to Brewster and Ellis (2002) young learners in the age of 3-6 years old are capable of symbolic thoughts, where a picture can be substituted for the real thing. They need opportunities to choose and decide on actions, to investigate, explore and be curious, be encouraged to questions to work things out, activities which help them to focus and pay attention in order to develop memory on concentration skills, activities which reinforce concepts where they can develop oral skills. Although the five to seven years old young learners love to play and learn best when they are enjoying themselves (Scott and Ytreberg, 2004) but they also have a very short attention and concentration span. Considering the facts above, the teachers should focus on varied and interesting activities that involve children in the activities. It is also important to use teaching media in the form of real objects or pictures to attract students' attention and motivate them to learn.

METHODS

This study has two research questions such as: (1) Is L1 (in this case bahasa Indonesia) used at lower grade level (kindergarten) English classrooms in Bandar Lampung? If so, how frequently is it used and for what purposes? (2) What are the attitudes of teacher towards using L1 in the English classroom?

Participants and sample

The research was conducted in two kindergartens in Bandar Lampung. One school is a bilingual school (X) while the other is an Islamic school (Y). Both of schools are private institutions. The sample consisted of five teachers from two kindergartens, four from bilingual school and one from Islamic school. They are non-native English speakers. Their mother tongue is bahasa Indonesia. All five are female teachers who

are appointed to teach English in their classroom but none of them were graduated from English Education Department. The range of teaching experience especially in teaching English for the most novice teacher is one year while four years for the most experienced. In the bilingual school, EFL studies begin in the level A (TK A) and in Islamic school begin in the level B (TK B). Table 1 summarizes this data for each of the participants.

Table 1. The teachers' sample

Teacher	Kindergarten	Graduated from	Experiences in teaching English
A	X	S1 Bahasa Indonesia Education	2
B	X	S1 English Literature	2
C	X	S1 English Literature	1
D	X	D2 Early Childhood Education	1
E	Y	S1 Chemical Engineering	4

In Kindergarten X, English has already been taught since in level A (TK A). There are two classes in TK A and two classes in TK B as well. One class is taught by two teachers. One is as homeroom teacher and another is as English teacher. Since the school is a bilingual school, the students are supposed to be able to speak English. So both homeroom and English teacher should teach English in the classroom. Even if it is not English lesson session, the English teacher should stay still in the classroom to assist the homeroom teacher. While in Kindergarten Y, English is introduced in level B (TK B). There are two classes in TK A and Two Classes in TK B. one class is taught by two homeroom teachers. There is only one English teacher in this kindergarten. However, the English teacher is not supposed to stay in the class all the time. She only attends to the class in the English lesson session.

Instrument

Data were collected in April – May 2012 using three tools: classroom observation, questionnaire, and interview. Three randomly-selected English classes (for 30 minutes per meeting) were conducted to be observed and recorded to find out how

frequently and on what situations L1 was used. Three classes were selected because in kindergarten X 2 teachers were supposed to teach 1 class. So teacher A collaborates with teacher B while teacher C collaborates with teacher D. A questionnaire was distributed to 5 teachers to discover their attitudes towards using L1 in the English classroom. The questionnaire items focused on the subjects' opinions towards the use of L1, the various situations when they think L1 can be used, and the perceived effectiveness of L1 in the classroom. Semi-structures interviews, after the classroom observations, the teachers were interviewed with questions focusing on the issues arisen from classroom observations in order to clarification.

Here is the questionnaire given.

Teacher Questionnaire on the Use of L1 in the English Classroom

This questionnaire aims to find out your attitude toward using L1 in the English classroom. Your answer will be used for research purposes only. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Should L1 be used in the English classroom?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

2. Do you use L1 in the English classroom?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. A little
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. A lot

3. When do you think it is necessary to use L1 in the English classroom?
 - a. To help define some abstract words or new vocabulary.
 - b. To explain difficult concepts or ideas.
 - c. To give instructions.
 - d. To discipline the class.
 - e. Other, please specify.

4. If you think the use of L1 is necessary in the English classroom, why?
 - a. It is less-time consuming.
 - b. It is more effective.
 - c. It aids comprehension greatly.
 - d. Other, please specify.

5. Do you think the use of L1 in the English classroom helps you teach this language?
 - a. Not
 - b. A little
 - c. Fairly much
 - d. A lot

6. How often do you think L1 should be used in the English classroom?
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Frequently

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Classroom observations

Table 2 shows the number of times and situations that L1 was used in the three session English classes.

Table 2. Classroom observation results

Situation	Situations on which L1 was used				Total
	Giving instructions	Explaining meanings of words	Explaining complex or new ideas	Disciplining the class	
Teacher A	2	3	2	0	7
Teacher B	0	2	1	2	5
Teacher C	0	1	1	1	3
Teacher D	4	4	2	1	11
Teacher E	4	7	3	3	13
Total	10	17	9	7	39

The table shows that L1 was used by the five teachers in the kindergarten when they teach English to give instructions and to explain the meaning of words, complex ideas, and discipline the class. The greatest use of L1, 17 times, was to explain the words. Teacher E used L1 to explain the words *address, dear, with love, (to) stick,*

memory, warm regard, and fold after her English explanations, which proved to be quite effective looking at the students' responses. Teacher D used L1 to explain the meanings of the words *spell, news, cost, and headline* following her English explanations. It can be concluded that the teachers use L1 only when they explain abstract or new words. All five teachers first attempted to explain the words and meanings of complex ideas in English, but resorted to L1 when they thought the students could not understand their English explanations.

Teacher D and E used L1 most frequently to give instructions. The teachers used L1 only after first giving instructions in English to make sure that their students were understand what was said. Since it was quite noise in those classes at the time, the teacher also used L1 instructions to discipline the students so they were clear that their teacher wanted their attention. These three class observations indicate that L1 is used on situations when English explanation does not work smoothly therefore the L1 takes role to facilitate and support the English teaching learning in the classroom.

Interviews

After the classroom observations, the five teachers whose classes had been observed were interviewed with questions focusing on the issues arisen from classroom observations in order to clarification. Mostly it is about their situational use of L1 in the English classroom and how they perceive the common issue that using L1 weakens the students' exposure to use English. Their answers are summarized as follows:

Teacher A:

The main reason I use L1 in the English classroom is I am their homeroom teacher. My duty is to assist the English teacher. So whenever she explains the materials in English and the students cannot catch on I will try to explain again to them in bahasa Indonesia. However, I will not do it right at that time, I explain to them after my partner finishes her explanation.

Teacher B:

The main reason I use L1 in the English classroom is that sometimes just because of their low proficiency level in English (yeah you know, they are still in the

kindergarten). I try to use English only to explain the meaning of the vocabulary or when to give instructions; however, if they look blank I will immediately translate the meaning into bahasa Indonesia.

Teacher C:

I think to use some L1 is more effective and less time-consuming. Usually, when I spend some time or use several English utterances to explain one idea, and the students still have no idea, using simple L1 word or utterance might solve the problem. Class time is also limited, only 30 minutes per meeting. About the issue of the use of L1 that could reduce students' exposure towards English, I think it does not make sense. The use of L1 in the English classroom actually does not mean that they do not speak English. You can see from our wall. There are so many English text, they can read them. Even if it is not in English session, we still try to communicate with English each other.

Teacher D:

I use L1 to discuss the meaning of some difficult and abstract words and to explain some complicated sentences. Honestly speaking, since I did not graduate from English education, my English is poor. So while the students learn English, I learn it as well. No wonder when students look puzzled after my poor English explanation I will use L1 to make it safe. Furthermore, I think the use of L1 is best to discipline the students since it sounds more effective than using English.

Teacher E:

I have been teaching English for almost 4 years in this kindergarten. Since it is not a bilingual school so English is only seen as a supplementary subject. The students are not expected to speak English. My duty is only to introduce some vocabulary just as an introduction. Therefore I emphasize the emotional attachment the students have toward their language and introduce English through bahasa Indonesia. I think that positive feedback should be expressed in both languages so they are able to understand then keep it in their heart. I do not want to burden my students to learn English in their childhood time.

Questionnaires.

As stated in the previous section, questionnaires were distributed to the 5 teachers.

The findings are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Results of the questionnaires on the use of L1 in the English classroom.

Question	Yes	No
Should L1 be used in the English classroom?	100%	0%

Question	Not at all	A little	Sometimes	A lot
Do you use L1 in the English classroom?	0%	20%	40%	40%

Question	When do you think it is necessary to use L1 in the English classroom?
To help define some abstract words or new vocabulary.	40%
To explain difficult concepts or ideas.	20%
To give instructions.	20%
To discipline the class.	20%
Other, please specify.	0%

Question	If you think the use of L1 is necessary in the English classroom, why?
It is less-time consuming.	40%
It is more effective.	40%
It aids comprehension greatly.	20%
Other, please specify.	0%

Question	Not	A little	Fairly much	A lot
Do you think the use of L1 in the English classroom helps you teach this language?	0%	0%	100%	0%

Question	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
How often do you think L1 should be used in the English classroom?	0%	0%	60%	40%

Table 3 shows that all the teachers who participated in the study think that L1 should be used in the English classroom. One of them use a little L1 when she teaches English, two confesses that they sometimes use it, and rest of the teachers stated that they use L1 a lot when they teach English. For them, L1 was most necessary to help define some abstract words or when they try to introduce new vocabulary (40%), while explaining difficult concepts or ideas, giving instruction, and disciplining the class share the same percentage (20%). Concerning why the use of L1 was necessary, they answered because “it is less-time consuming” (40%), “it is more effective” (40%) and “it aids comprehension greatly” (20%). All of them are agree that the use of L1 in the English classroom helps them in teaching English. More than half of the teachers (60%) think L1 should be used in the classroom ‘sometimes’.

Why L1 is used in the English classrooms.

The focus of the class often determines how much exposure gets placed on using or limiting L1 in the classroom. A bilingual school may often be better served if students try to use English as much as possible. When a student cannot understand a word or utterance, or cannot follow the teaching learning process, then he/she has the chance to interpret the meaning by looking at the situation. But in the school that English only seen as a supplementary subject, then the focus is only for introduction. Students practice in English with the vocabulary introduction only provided by the teacher. In general, when students can use their L1 to ask questions and confirm their misunderstanding or confusion, it often leads to a clearer realization of the form and meaning of the language. Lower-grade level students may also need further explanation and clarification on some points of the new materials. It should be noted that the teacher can sometimes use the L1 to help students produce utterance beyond their ability. Students produce utterance in their L1 then the teacher translates and ask them to repeat after her/him. The teacher might also consider using the L1 in the English classroom to shortcut the time. An explanation in L1 may be necessary with a class of where no one speaks English. A student may get stuck in a teaching learning process and find themselves unable to express their opinions, answers, or ask the questions. Therefore, the teacher can simply allow them to use their L1 but stimulate them to say it again English with the teacher’s help.

The study indicates that the L1 was used by the majority of teachers investigated. They responded positively toward the use of L1 in the English classroom. The teachers that were investigated in this study indicated that do translation of some words, ideas, or even conduct disciplines in the classroom are good way to learn a foreign language. Based on the classroom observation I can assume that without switching the language, young learners would be likely to lose and fail to learn English. This study also finds that in the lower grade-level (in this case kindergarten classes) L1 has a valuable role to play in the English classroom. Teaching English for young learners requires teachers to teach efficiently and appropriately. It indicates that the L1 gains more benefits by incorporating the students' L1 as a learning tool and a facilitator for an efficient teaching.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that the use of L1 in the English classroom does not reduce students' exposure to use English. It is able to support the teaching learning process. It is hoped that the finding will make people realize that the L1 has a lot of roles in the English classroom. The comparison between Teacher A, B, C, D, and E's qualification as well as the perceived centrality of the L1 in the teaching-learning process, bring up issues concerning teacher education and the knowledge base required for teaching languages to young learners. Who is the ideal teacher in young language learners programs? Should it be an expert English teacher? A teacher whose expertise is in teaching young learners? Or maybe a language teacher who is trained in teaching young learners or a young learner teacher who is trained in English as Foreign Language? Whoever the teacher is and whatever his/her educational background is, he/she should be encouraged to read a lot of literature related to Teaching English for Young Learners, and share problems and look for the solution together with his/her colleagues. We can see the findings above that the L1 has a valuable role to play in the L2 classroom. Teaching English for young learners requires teachers to teach efficiently and appropriately. By referring to some related theories and researches of the use L1 in L2 classroom, it can be seen that the use of L1 has an important role and can facilitate all aspects of language instructions. It indicates that the L1 gains more benefits by incorporating the students' L1 as a learning tool and a facilitator for an efficient teaching. L1 is most useful at beginning and low levels (in this case for kindergarten students). If students have little or no

knowledge of the L2, L1 can be used as an introduction. As for the teacher, fluent L2 teachers are able to collaborate with non-fluent L2 teachers. Non fluent L2 teachers are advised to learn and practise more so with consideration of when and how to use L1 and L2, their skill in teaching foreign language for young learners will develop.

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