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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?

- What are the beliefs of the students regarding the use of mother tongue in the foreign language classrooms?
 - Do these beliefs differ according to the target language levels of the students?
- Are the instructors satisfied with the amount of English they use in the classes, or do they want to use more or less than the present one?
- Are the students satisfied with the amount of English their instructors use in the class or do they expect their them to use more or less English than the present situation?

2. Methodology

This study is a descriptive study designed as a mixed method design using both qualitative and quantitative data. The study was carried out in the preparatory classes that the instructors were teaching in the School of Foreign Languages, Pamukkale University. In the school of foreign languages, the learners have to take the English preparatory education for two terms, 32 weeks in total with 20 hours of classes each week. The students cannot continue their departments before they successfully complete the preparatory year which is the end of B2 level according to the Common European Framework (CEF). The curriculum followed depends on the three levels of classes; elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate. The decision as to which a student is going to attend an appropriate level is made through the placement test administered at the beginning of the academic year. The beginner learners only take the elementary core language course at the beginning for ten weeks. The core language course includes all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and related grammatical patterns and vocabulary. The pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate level students take the core language courses together with the skill based listening and speaking and reading and writing courses.

2.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 20 instructors who teach English and 286 prep-class learners studying English in The School of Foreign Languages, Pamukkale University. The instructors had various years of experience in teaching English. 7 of the instructors had 3 to 5 years, 5 of them were 5 to 10 years, 5 of them were 10 to 15 years, and 3 of them were 15 or more years of teaching experience. In addition, the instructors had different educational backgrounds in terms of BA, MA or PhD degrees they held. 13 of them were ELT graduates, and 7 of them were graduates of other language related departments. 9 of the instructors were MA graduates, 4 of them were still MA students, and 7 of them had only a BA degree. Among the MA graduates or students, only 5 of the instructors had their MA study in the field of ELT. 2 of the instructors were PhD students; however, neither of them was having their PhD in the department of ELT. On the other hand, the students were in twenty different groups with three different levels of English, namely, pre-intermediate (51.7%), intermediate (28.3%) and upper-intermediate levels (19.9%). The students were grouped according to their placement test scores. The range of their age was between 18-21.

2.2. Data collection

For the purpose of the study, we had both qualitative and quantitative data: audio recordings of instructors in their classes, a questionnaire administered to instructors, a questionnaire administered to students, semi-structured interviews with 20 instructors and 39 students. The recordings were completed in about 10 weeks in each class. Each class hour lasted for about 45 minutes, and all 20 instructors (each one) were recorded 8 times in different courses, which is a totally 160 record. The instructors themselves audio recorded their classes. In addition, the questionnaires were designed to back up the data collected through the audio recordings. The questionnaires were adapted from various researchers who conducted similar research in the literature (Jingxia, 2008; Schweers, 1999; Duff & Polio, 1990; Levine, 2003; Bateman, 2008; Cook, 2001). The first questionnaire aimed at finding out the beliefs of the instructors towards the use of L1 in the classroom. The second questionnaire administered to the students aimed at finding out the amount of L1 the instructors used in the classroom, and the students' beliefs about it. Both questionnaires were reviewed by some ELT experts and piloted. The questionnaire for instructors had

Cronbach's alpha value of .90, and the questionnaire for students had Cronbach's alpha value of .87. Furthermore, the follow up interview sessions were conducted in order to back up the questionnaires and the audio recordings, and triangulate the data. The Interviews were semi-structured and conducted with 20 instructors and 39 students, who were composed of two randomly selected voluntary students from each instructor's classes.

2.3. Data analysis

The data collected through audio recordings in this study were analyzed by listening to the recordings and taking notes of the instances when the mother tongue was used by the instructors. Thus, the functions of the use of mother tongue have been categorized under various group headings/themes. The total use for each pre-determined category was tallied. While listening to the recordings, if an extra category was decided, it was added in the table. Five of the recordings were also listened by two other instructors to ensure that the researchers were correctly categorizing the instances when mother tongue was used. The instances of L1 use were tallied and categorized as 51 items. They were also ranked from 1 to 51.

The data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 16.0. First, the data were calculated by using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test whether they were parametric or non-parametric. It was calculated that some parts of the questionnaires were parametric and the others were non-parametric. Next, independent sample t-tests, two-way ANOVA, were used for parametric data, Mann-Whitney-U Test and Kruskal Wallis test for non-parametric data in order to find out whether there was a significant difference between instructors' use of mother tongue and variables such as their educational background, teaching experience, gender, the level of the class they were teaching in. The results of the audio recordings were compared to the results of the questionnaires and to the answers given in the interviews in order to be able to see whether the instructors were aware of how much L1 they used in the classroom or not.

3. Results and discussion

Regarding the first research question as to how much L1 the teachers use in the classes and in which situations they use it and whether they aware of it, the results of the instructor questionnaire revealed that the instructors used L1 often to communicate with students outside the class. They usually used L1 for rapport building purposes (making jokes, showing concern to the students, showing empathy, etc.), to explain difficult concepts or ideas, to talk about administrative information (course policies, announcements, deadlines, etc.), to explain grammar rules, and to talk about the exams (see Table 1). Rapport building is one of the functions mentioned for which L1 is used in most of the studies done previously such as Schweers (1999), Saxena (2009), Al-Nofaie (2010), Bateman (2008).

On the other hand, what the instructors stated about the use of L1 in their classes was different from what they actually performed in their classrooms. They stated that L1 was usually used for rapport building purposes (making jokes, showing concern to the students, showing empathy, etc.), but it was 45th place in the ranking list in the audio recording. Next, they stated that L1 was usually used to explain difficult concepts or ideas; however, it was in 49th

Table 1. The most frequent L1 use the instructors claim in the questionnaire, and the class recording results.

Situation	Mean	SD	Level of Participation	The Rank in Recordings
21-To communicate with students outside the class	4.40	.68	Often	-
25-For rapport building purposes. (Making jokes, showing concern to the students, showing empathy, etc.)	4.00	.86	Usually	45
22-To explain difficult concepts or ideas	3.95	.89	Usually	49
20-To talk about administrative information (course policies, announcements, deadlines, etc.)	3.80	.95	Usually	7

26. Because of time limitation. (I have to cover too much material in a short time).	3.50	1.00	Usually	-
09. To explain grammar rules.	3.45	.89	Usually	9
14. To talk about the exams.	3.41	.88	Usually	-

place in the ranking list. In addition, they also stated that L1 was used to talk about administrative information (course policies, announcements, deadlines, etc.), which was the only item parallel with what they actually performed in the classroom (see Table 1).

Although instructors had such beliefs regarding the L1 use, the actual use of L1 in the classrooms was different. According to our data collected from class recordings, instructors used L1 to make the topic/meaning clear (by giving examples, explaining, making extra explanations, etc.), to present & explain the topic, to give feedback, to teach the meaning of new vocabulary, to translate sentences that the instructor utters or those in the book/listening text without considering if it is understood or not, and to give/explain tasks or instructions (see Table 2).

Table 2. The recorded use of L1 most in classes

Rank	Item	Recorded Items	Tally
1	22	To make the topic/meaning clear (by giving examples, explaining, making extra explanations, etc.)	896
2	2	To present & explain the topic	474
3	13	To give feedback	378
4	5	To teach the meaning of new vocabulary	339
5	48	To translate sentences that the instructor utters or those in the book/listening text without considering if it is understood or not	262
6	8	To give/explain tasks or instructions	260

During the interview, the instructors stated that they used L1 mostly in the grammar and the writing sections while they were explaining difficult parts of them. They also pointed out that they switched into L1 when they realized the students did not understand the topic/task/presented item, etc. For feedback, except one, all of the instructors claimed that they used L1 while giving feedback. 30% of the instructors stated that they directly used L1 for vocabulary teaching, but the others stated that they tried to explain the words in English, drew pictures, or acted out, etc. However, if the students still did not understand, then they used L1. All of the instructors emphasized that when they realized that the students could not understand, they used L1 to explain more or to translate. When giving/explaining tasks/instructions, some of them stated that they used L1 to explain the instructions. On the other hand, all of them pointed out that they used L1 to give homework in order to avoid students' complaint or any confusion among them. Greggio and Gil (2007), Morahan (2007), support this idea by pointing out that the key with teacher use of L1 is that it is used for clarification purposes, after an attempt has been made to communicate ideas in L2, and students still appear to be confused. One of the students interviewed, S8, pointed out that since they sometimes did not understand when the explanations were in English, the teachers were forced to use Turkish by the students in class. Timucin and Baytar (2015) found out that teachers exploit L1 to translate when students do not understand, to check understanding, to explain procedures, to give directions, to explain grammar and to manage the class.

In addition, the instructors' claimed that they sometimes used L1 to explain what s/he aimed to tell the students, to catch the students' attention, and to explain the meaning of new words. They stated that they rarely used L1 to elicit English words or sentences (see Table 3).

Table 3. The least frequent L1 use the instructors claim in the questionnaire, and the class recording results.

Situation	Mean	SD	Level of Participation	The Rank in Recordings
08-To explain what I aim to tell my students.	2.80	.52	Sometimes	1
18-To catch the students' attention.	2.75	.97	Sometimes	32
10-To explain the meaning of new words.	2.70	.92	Sometimes	4
17-To elicit English words or sentences.	2.70	.47	Sometimes	-
12-To give instructions.	2.55	.94	Rarely	6

On the other hand, what the instructors stated in the questionnaire was different from what they actually performed in their classrooms. Although they claimed that they sometimes used L1 to explain what s/he aimed to tell the students, it was in the 1st place in the ranking list. Next, they claimed that they sometimes used L1 to catch the students' attention, it was in the 32nd place in the ranking list. In addition, they stated that they sometimes used L1 to explain the meaning of new words, but it was in the 4th place in the ranking list. Another striking use of L1 was that they claimed that they rarely used L1 to give instructions; however, it was in the 6th place in the ranking list (see Table 3). Our class recordings revealed that the instructors were not aware how frequently they used L1 for various purposes. As a matter of fact the instructors used L1 least for the purpose of talking about something that is not related to course; confirming students' understanding; conflict management; discussing course policies, attendance and other administrative information; transition from one topic to the other (OK, well, now, let's); and helping students find the correct answers for the questions & activities in for the tasks in their textbooks (See Table 4).

Table 4. The recorded use of L1 least in classes

Rank	Item	Recorded Items	Tally
46	38	Talking about something that is not related to course	7
47	15	Confirming students' understanding	6
48	10	Conflict management	6
49	20	Discussing course policies, attendance and other administrative information	4
50	40	Transitions (OK, well, now, let's)	4
51	51	Helping the students find the correct answers for the questions & activities	2

The second research question focused on whether the instructors' use of L1 were affected by different variables such as level of students, the content of the course, educational background, and the experience of instructors. Our findings indicated that there was no statistically significant difference regarding the level students ($p = 0.357 > 0.05$).

However, the upper intermediate level had a rather low mean ($m = 6.50$), which showed that the use of L1 fell down as the level increased. Qing (2010) has emphasized that "code-switching represents one of the strategies that EFL teachers often use to accommodate the students' level of English proficiency." (p. 112). Atkinson (1987) claims that "while giving instructions talking about the classroom methodology, while presenting and reinforcing the language, L1 is mostly used with the early stages of proficiency levels" (p. 244). Cole (1998) also claims that "the best use of L1 is with the beginning and low level students" (p. 2), which supports that L1 use in the classes differ according to the levels of the students.

Regarding the content of the course, only writing course was statistically significant ($p = 0.03 < 0.05$) among core language, reading, writing and listening and speaking courses. Instructors claimed that they used L1 most in writing courses. In addition, the results in the recordings and the questionnaires support their claim. Our recording results showed that the instructors used L1 while teaching as to how to identify and write topic sentences, supporting

sentences/ideas, paragraphs, thesis statements, and types of essays as well as giving feedback about their productions. This result is in line with the results in the study of Stapa and Majid (2009) who claimed that when teachers use L1 in L2 writing classes with limited proficiency, students produce better quality essays.

On the other hand, our statistical computations revealed that there was no statistically significant difference regarding instructors' educational background ($p = 0.29 > 0.05$), the degree the instructors held such as BA or MA ($p = 0.067 > 0.05$), and the year of experience they had ($p = 0.28 > 0.05$).

Our next research question was related to whether the beliefs of instructors differ according to some variables such as instructors' experience, instructors' educational background (ELT or Non-ELT, BA or MA degree), the content of the course. Our results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference for instructors' experience ($p = 0.73 > 0.05$), instructors' educational background (ELT or Non-ELT, ($p = 0.15 > 0.05$), the degree the instructors held such as BA or MA ($p = 0.76 > 0.05$), and the content of the course ($p = 0.067 > 0.05$). This is parallel with the results of Oflaz (2009) and Moran (2009).

The fourth research question focused on as to what the beliefs of the students regarding the use of L1 were in the foreign language classrooms. Students totally agreed that the more English they used, the better they would learn it ($m = 4.70$). In addition, they agreed that they could help each other during the classes by using L1 ($m = 3.76$); using English needed extra effort ($m = 3.74$); L1 should be used in order to talk about the class rules, attendance or administrative information in class ($m = 3.72$); use of L1 aided comprehension ($m = 3.69$); in order to successfully acquire English, they should separate it from L1 ($m = 3.57$); they felt more comfortable about some functions or topics in L1 rather than in English ($m = 3.65$); they could talk in L1 in the class both with the instructors and with the students ($m = 3.43$). Students are aware of the importance of using target language in classes; however, they believed that they needed L1 for better comprehension, to learn some key issues in grammar, and to negotiate their problems in learning the target language.

On the other hand, students totally disagreed with the item that when the instructor was too tired, s/he did not use English. In addition, they disagreed that they were used to the instructor's using L1, and it was hard for them to change it ($m = 2.40$); the instructor and students should use only English to discuss course policies, attendance, and other administrative information ($m = 2.36$); there was no use in using English in the classroom ($m = 2.23$); they thought they did not understand when the instructor spoke in English ($m = 2.18$). Students also revealed that their instructors had a tendency to use the target language most of the time, and they expected them to use it because they stated that they could understand them when they spoke the target language to most extent.

Our last research question was whether the instructors were satisfied with the amount of English they used in the classes, or whether they wanted to use more or less than the present one. The same question was asked to students, too. Among the instructors, 12.5% of them stated that they needed to use less English, 51.25% of them pointed out that they should keep the same amount they use at present although 36.25% stated that they needed to use more English in their classes. On the other hand, what students stated regarding the amount of use of L1 was parallel with the instructors. Among the students, 6.5% of them expected that the instructors should use less English, and 60.25% of them expected that the instructors should keep the present amount of L1. However, 36.25% of them expected more English in the classes, which is also parallel with the expectations of the instructors.

4. Conclusion

It is a good idea for sure to use L2 most of the time; however, teachers should also know that they should not feel guilty while using L1 when it is really necessary and appropriate to do so. The situation might also be in the opposite way, that is, the teachers might be counting too much on L1, which provides less amount of target language input. In this study, we have found out that the instructors used L1 most for rapport building purposes, making the topic/meaning clear (by giving examples, explaining, making extra explanations, etc.), explaining difficult concepts or ideas, etc. However, they used it least for the purpose of talking about something that is not related to course; confirming students' understanding; conflict management; discussing course policies, attendance and other administrative information; transition from one topic to the other (OK, well, now, let's ...); and helping students find the correct answers for the questions & activities in for the tasks in their textbooks. 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. Both the instructors and students were satisfied about the amount of L1 use in their classes.

Through this study, we hope that teachers will be able to see the circumstances in which the others use L1, and have better understanding regarding the role of L1 in their classes. This study may have an impact on teachers in terms of questioning their own L1 use, and being more aware of their own teaching. Teacher trainers may also make use of the present study while they are training the prospect teachers. They may explain that using the target language as much as possible should be the goal of every foreign language teacher, however, the use of the students' L1 might also be necessary from time to time, so it should not be a taboo for them. This study might create some awareness as to how much and for which functions some teachers feel the necessity of using L1 in their classes. They might find some solutions for some of the functions for which L1 is used, and thus, teachers can use more of the target language, which will lead to more target language communication in their classes.

We had some assumptions and limitations for the study. The participant instructors and their students were assumed to represent the population. The classes recorded in the study were assumed to follow the normal procedures that the instructors had while they were not recorded. In addition, the instructors were expected not to make any changes in their teaching. The answers given to the questionnaires and the interview questions both by the instructors and the students were assumed to be sincere and reflect their real thoughts and feelings honestly.

As for limitations, one of the limitations of the study was that it was not a longitudinal study. Although it was tried hard to have as many recordings as possible in order to make the instructors and students grow more accustomed to being recorded and to prevent them from conducting themselves, it was still not satisfactory. Another limitation is that, since the study was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages, Pamukkale University, the results were limited only to the instructors and students in this school. If it were applied in different universities, it could have some different results.

A further study that will look into the same dimensions with the present study may use longitudinal studies and a higher number of participants. Furthermore, the participants may be asked why exactly they used L1 in the situations directly after the recordings to find out the real reasons for it. Moreover, further study may look into the students' use of L1 in L2 classrooms, too. Finally, a further study might also look into the effects of the use of L1 on the success of the students. Whether the use of L1 contributes to the success of the students or hinders it or whether the various functions of using L1 help the students learn the target language better can be analyzed through a longitudinal study.

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