

Different Age Groups' Conceptions of Teachers' L1 Use in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

English is generally accepted as a medium of international communication. It is therefore without doubt that one of the ultimate goals of students of English language learning is to be able to communicate in English. However, students for whom English is neither their mother tongue nor the official language in their country have limited exposure to the English language. The language classroom seems to be the only place where they can learn, practise and use the target language. It is therefore claimed that it is crucial for teachers to point out the importance of English and to teach entirely in the target language to encourage students to use it in the classroom. On the other hand, it is argued that the exclusive use of English in the EFL classroom might hinder students' concept development process. When English language teachers should use the target language in the classroom is now being questioned. Therefore, this study aimed to examine what students really think about English teachers' use of L1 in the classroom. Three different age groups: high school students, undergraduates and graduates were randomly selected and asked to complete a questionnaire to show their conceptions of teachers' use of L1 in the classroom. Differences between age groups were discussed in order to provide fruitful implications for teacher training and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).

Keywords: age groups, students' conceptions, teachers' use of L1, EFL classroom

Introduction

The use by non-native teachers of L1 (first language/mother tongue) or L2 (second language) in the EFL classroom has been a controversial issue in English language teaching. One of the views expressed is that L2 (i.e. English language) use can help students to be exposed to the true communicative use of the target language (Cook, 2008). This view has been supported by the natural method which is also known as the direct method. It was proposed that the grammar translation method should be replaced when it was found that this method could not provide adequate language input for students to be able to use it in everyday life. The direct method seems to be the quickest way of learning the target language and expanding vocabulary (Macnee, 1952, cited in Tiwari, 2008). In this method, it is believed that learners should learn the target language naturally in the same way as they learn their mother tongue and that meaning should be associated directly with the target language without L1 use or translation. On the other

hand, L1 tends to have a role to play in the classroom (Qian et al., 2009) as the exclusive use of English in the EFL classroom might hinder students' concept development process (Skinner, 1985). Another suggestion is that switching from L2 to L1 might be an effective strategy for improving students' language proficiency (Pan and Pan, 2009).

Although the use and role of L1 in the EFL classroom have been discussed, it is still being questioned whether the students' mother tongue has a place in the classroom or, if it does, when teachers should use it (Littlewood and Yu, 2011). Several studies have been conducted on the use of L1 in the classroom, such as those by Schweers (1999); Norman (2008); Carson and Kashihara (2012); Blackman (2013/2014); and Thongwichit and Buripakdi (2014). Some studies, like those by Schweers (1999) and Blackman (2013/2014), have focused on teachers' perceptions or conceptions of L1 use in the classroom while others, such as the work of Norman (2008); Carson and Kashihara (2012); and Thongwichit and Buripakdi (2014) have emphasised students' perceptions. However, the studies focusing on students' conceptions of L1 use have generally investigated whether there was a change or difference when students' English language proficiency differed or improved. From the results of these studies, it was very likely that language proficiency had an effect on students' conceptions of L1 use in the EFL classroom. Hence, the current study aimed to explore another factor that might affect students' conceptions of teachers' use of L1, namely, the students' age. What is questioned is whether or not, when students become older or more mature, they will have more tolerance of ambiguity or have more patience or eagerness to concentrate on L2 than is the case with younger students.

Research Questions

1. What were the three age groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1?
2. Was there any significant difference in conceptions of teachers' use of L1 between the three different age groups?

Research Methodology

Participants

The participants from three age groups: high school students, undergraduates and graduates were randomly selected from Thai public institutions to take part in the study. The participants were 12–17 years old, 18–21 years old and 23–49 years old, respectively. Each of these three groups comprised 100 participants. They were non-English majors. Their English language proficiency ranged from elementary to intermediate.

Instrument

A questionnaire was used to elicit the participants' conceptions of teachers' use of L1 in the EFL classroom in Thailand. It consisted of two sections, namely, personal information and conceptions towards teachers' use of L1. The first section required the participants to provide some background information, such as their age, self-

assessment of English language proficiency, and level and field of study. The second section contained 21 items representing common classroom situations. These situations were synthesised from several studies and related literature that were concerned with language use in the classroom and code-switching, such as Salaberri (1995); Schweers (1999); Hughes et al. (2007); Cook (2008); Norman (2008); Watson Todd, Chaiyasuk and Tantisawetrat (2008); Trakulkasemsuk and Ketwandee (2013); Blackman (2013/2014); and Sali (2014). The participants were asked to rate how frequently they perceived their English teachers using L1 in the classroom on a five-point rating scale ranging from never (1) to always (5).

Data analyses

After the data from the questionnaire were tallied, the data were analysed by means and standard deviations to show the three groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1. In addition, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the conceptions among the three groups of teachers' use of L1.

Data Interpretation

The mean scores gained from the questionnaire were interpreted as follows:

Mean score	Interpretation
0.01-1.00	Teachers should never use Thai.
1.01-2.00	Teachers should hardly use Thai.
2.01-3.00	Teachers should sometimes use Thai.
3.01-4.00	Teachers should often use Thai.
4.01-5.00	Teachers should always use Thai

Results

This section presents the results of the current study related to the survey of the three different age groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1 and the investigation as to whether the three different age groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1 were significantly different.

Research Question 1: What were the three age groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1?

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations (SDs) from the participants' ratings of the 21 common classroom situations in order to illustrate the three different age groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1.

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation of different age groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1

Situations	High school students		Undergrads		Graduates	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Establish rapport	3.44	0.79	3.61	0.83	3.24	1.12
Review	3.46	0.77	3.55	0.81	3.33	0.99
Give instructions	3.19	0.77	3.34	0.82	3.28	1.43
Explain difficult or complex content	3.52	1.07	3.80	0.84	3.63	0.96
Explain unfamiliar content	3.47	0.99	3.82	0.81	3.48	0.99
Define new words	3.74	0.98	3.81	0.91	3.27	1.14
Explain grammar	3.65	0.91	3.90	0.83	3.34	1.05
Explain what students have read	3.59	0.89	3.81	0.83	3.19	1.08
Explain what students have listened to or watched	3.59	0.89	4.11	0.92	3.23	1.11

Situations	High school students		Undergrads		Graduates	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Teach writing	3.42	0.92	3.45	0.88	3.10	1.11
Teach speaking	3.65	1.02	3.56	1.08	3.09	1.60
Explain cultures of English native speakers	3.06	1.00	3.49	0.89	3.22	1.00
Check understanding	3.23	0.95	3.66	0.95	3.18	1.12
Manage discipline	3.24	0.99	3.68	0.84	2.97	1.13
Talk about things unrelated to content	3.24	0.91	3.42	0.82	2.97	1.17
Give compliments	3.40	0.91	3.40	0.86	2.67	1.32
Complain	2.80	0.92	3.27	0.82	2.56	1.07
Give feedback	3.52	0.97	3.73	0.86	3.13	1.12
Give and explain homework or assignments	3.28	0.97	3.70	0.86	3.18	1.06
Give information about tests and evaluation	3.51	1.01	3.71	0.86	3.19	1.01
Wrap up the lesson	3.60	1.03	3.80	0.84	3.16	1.15
Overall	3.41	0.94	3.65	1.01	3.16	1.13

The overall mean scores (3.41, 3.65 and 3.16) displayed in Table 1 showed that the participants from all three age groups perceived that their English teachers often use the Thai language in the EFL classroom. Moreover, it can be seen that the high school students and undergraduates tended to believe that their teachers should speak Thai or use L1 in most situations, while the mean scores of the graduates' conceptions of teachers' use of L1 seemed to be slightly lower. When we look at the mean scores of each situation, participants from all three age groups were found to prefer that their teachers use English when they complained. On the other hand, when we look at the highest mean scores of each group, it can be seen that the high school students perceived that their teachers should often use Thai when they defined new words (mean = 3.74, SD = 0.98). The undergraduates believed that their teachers should always speak Thai in order to explain what they have listened to or watched (mean = 4.11, SD = 0.92) and the graduates thought their teachers should often use L1 when they explained difficult or complex content (mean = 3.63, SD = 0.96).

Research Question 2: Was there any significant difference in conceptions of teachers' use of L1 among the three different age groups?

To investigate whether there was any significance difference in conceptions among the three age groups of teachers' use of L1, one-way ANOVA was used and the results are presented below:

Table 2
Results of one-way ANOVA

Source	<i>df</i>	SS	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Between groups	2	2.62	1.31	25.86	7.95
Within groups	60	3.04	0.05		
Total	62	5.66			

As shown on Table 2, no difference was found among the three groups' conceptions of teachers' use of L1 when the *p*-value was 7.95 (with this being higher than the minimum value of .05). It can be concluded that participants' ages had no effect on their conceptions of teachers' use of L1 in the EFL classroom.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has presented students' conceptions of how frequently they wanted their teachers to use or speak Thai in their English classes. The results revealed that most students thought that their teachers should sometimes, or often, use L1 to teach English in most of the situations presented. In addition, students' ages did not influence or affect these conceptions.

It is then worth discussing the encouragement that teachers have been receiving to use English in their class as much as possible (Franklin, 1990; Auerbach, 1993; Atkinson, 1993). On the other hand, this study's findings highlight students' preferences. Therefore, English language teachers should be aware that, although using English in class provides students with exposure to the real use of the target language and creates an atmosphere leading to language practice (Crawford, 2004), using L1 in class is also unavoidable (Cook, 2008).

In addition, the findings can be used due to their implications for teacher education. To be specific, it is necessary to instruct teacher trainees or pre-service teachers so they recognise the role of L1 in English language teaching; it is also necessary that they are trained in how and when to appropriately use L1 in the EFL classroom (Alrabah et al., 2016).

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