

Reasons for Afghan Teachers' First Language Use in EFL Classes

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ABSTRACT

The use of L1 in EFL classes has been an ongoing debate for many years since language educators use L1 in EFL classes for different reasons. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the reasons for Afghan teachers' L1 use in EFL classes at Balkh University. Semi-structured interview was conducted with a sample of 5 EFL educators with 10-15 years of teaching experience from the English Department of Balkh University. The sample for the study was chosen purposively due to proximity, easy accessibility and availability of the participants. Content analysis was employed for the analysis of the obtained data from the study based on the emergent themes. The result shows that Afghan EFL teachers at Balkh University use L1 in their classes for different purposes, namely, as a pedagogical tool for clarification, as a tool for establishing rapport, as a discipline and class management tool, based on curriculum and syllabus demand and as per need of students' level of language proficiency.

Keywords: first language use, EFL classes, teaching, Afghan language educator

Introduction

The argument whether to use first language (L1) in a foreign language classroom has been ongoing among English language educators and in the field of education for many years (Brown, 2000). An advocate of the monolingual approach, Krashen, argued that students who learn foreign language follow the same path as they learn their mother language, therefore, the use of mother tongue should be minimized in the classroom (1987). Most EFL teachers share this perception and feel frustrated or inadequate, even some practices suggest the use of mother tongue (Mattioli, 2004). So, the view had its effect on language learning all over the world.

Karimian and Mohammadi (2015), similarly, discussed that the use of first language does not lead to communicative competence in the target language which gradually results in discomfort towards first language use in foreign language learning. Likewise, the ideologies of

disbelief towards L1 continue to encircle many dominants of the second language teaching methods today replacing it with some interpretations of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and approaches such as Direct Method. These interpretations and approaches discourage the use of L1 in the L2 classroom (Cummins, 2007).

Hence, for the last four decades, the discussion of L1 use when teaching English in EFL classes has been unable to reach a conclusion. Prodromou (2001) referred to mother tongue as the “skeleton in the closet” Gabrielatos (2001) associated it as the “bone of contention”. These views simply reflect the different methodological shifts in teaching English Language which has brought different viewpoints on the use of students’ first language in EFL classes. That is why, in spite of some English-only policies in many education institutions, many scholars realized that appropriate use of L1 might be helpful for students (Hawks, 2001). Meyer (2008) stated that the use of first language in the class motivates students and makes the classroom a more comprehensible place while lowering the use of effective filters. Norman (2008) claimed that students are more inattentive and unresponsive in the class, but when L1 is used the opposite happens.

In contrast to the past, the majority of English teachers in today’s world are non- native speakers of English. Such changes in the profile of teachers open new doors in teaching methodology. So, many researchers have considered the use of L1 helpful. The researchers are looking for the ways to improve teaching and learning particularly concentrating on the benefits of L1 use in EFL classrooms and exploring the situations in which teachers use L1 in their classrooms.

The issue is vigorous for non-native teachers who may have different perceptions of the phenomena (Schweers, 1999). Language educators of Afghanistan are no exception to this case. Instructors of English Department like many other EFL teachers have long been in problem as to the use of L1 in EFL classrooms. On one hand, there is the idea of English only policy that restricts them for years. On the other hand, they face challenge while teaching because the English only policies they hold draws them back from their objectives. As for the researchers’ experience as English language educator at university level in Afghanistan, students’ demand for the use of L1 in English classrooms made them use students’ first language in the class. As per their experience, students’ L1 is used for better comprehension and students’ engagement in classroom. Similarly, many language educators seem to be convinced with the use of L1 in EFL classes for different reasons. Therefore, the aim of this study is to find reasons and purposes for language educators’ first language use in EFL classes attempting to address the following research question.

1. What are the reasons for Afghan Teachers’ First Language Use in EFL Classes at Balkh University?

Literature Review

It is noticeably clear that there are many debates and discussions among teachers, negotiators, and researchers whether to use L1 (Native language) for teaching L2 (second language) or foreign language. Although many oppose the use of L1 in L2 classes because L1 imperils the progress and effectiveness of L2 learning, but the result of many studies revealed that the use of L1 plays an important role in learning L2. However, the discussion of using L1 has been questioned for many years. In this regard, Dixon (2011) contended the idea that although L1 is not a suitable tool to be used in L2 classrooms, it has a variety of roles to play at all levels.

One of the basic roles of using L1 is its pedagogic value. According to Bolitho (1983) as cited in “Talking Shop” L2 learners come to the class by speaking at least one other language. They use their experiences or the knowledge of their L1 that help them learn the target language. The second role of L1 is considered to be the psychological role. Amato (1996) as cited in Langer (2001) stated that perceptions influence performance. So, learners’ perceptions toward themselves, the target language, the speakers, the teacher and the class environment affect the acquisition of a language. Langer further added that teachers can keep students engaged in meaningful communication by allowing them to use their L1 in the classroom. If students are banned from using their L1 in the classroom, they may feel unimportant. In addition to above mentioned roles, the use of L1 in EFL classes plays a socio- cultural role which links students’ culture with EFL classes. Prodromou (2001) regarded the use of L1 as a means through which students bring their cultural background to L2 Classroom. Prodromou further argued that classroom ethnic cultures are basis for selection of various classroom activities.

Reviewing the literature of L1-L2, it can be clearly seen that teachers use L1 for a number of different purposes. Grim (2010) suggested that teachers use L1 for the metalinguistic explanation, class/management/discipline, empathy/solidarity, task instruction, and immediate and delayed translation purposes. Agreeing with many of these purposes for the use of L1, Cook (2001) suggested that teachers use L1 to explain grammar, convey meaning, check meanings of words or sentences, maintain discipline, organize the class, build rapport with students and test them.

With linkage to the purpose of L1 use in EFL classes, Pablo (2011) conducted a study on students and teachers’ reasons for using the first language within the foreign language classroom (French and English) in Central Mexico. The result for this study showed that teachers use L1 for clarification, building good communication with students based on students’ language proficiency and institute policy.

Findings from different studies showed that teachers use L1 in EFL classes for different purposes. A study in Spain by Tang (2002) showed that both teachers and students use L1 in their English classroom for problem solving purpose. Likewise, the finding from another study in an Ethiopian college Beressa (2003) illustrated that a limited amount of L1 use in EFL classes can have supportive and facilitating role in L2 learning.

Bayan Al-Hashemi and Al- Amir (2017) have conducted a study through which they found EFL teachers’ justifications for the use of students’ first language in EFL classes. Teachers in this study indicated that using students’ first language helps them to be more specific in teaching. For example, it is easy for them to teach many abstract ideas via students’ first language more clearly and meaningfully. This study also revealed that the majority of teachers agree to the use of students’ L1 in their EFL classrooms.

In the same way, Fatih Yavuz (2012) examined “reasons for English teachers use of L1 in L2 classes in Turkey”. The result of the study emphasized on the use of L1 in structural teaching, but for communicative teaching purposes they prefer to use English only. ELT teachers prefer using students’ first language, which breaks the psychological barriers before the teaching and creates a low anxiety atmosphere for both teachers and learners.

Blackman (2014) conducted a study which aimed at investigating EFL teachers’ reasons for the use of L1 in a primary and secondary classroom in Belarus. The results of her study showed that teachers consider L1 a (temporary) alternative scaffold technique. The study took the stance that lack of experience could force a teacher to use L1. For example, by not knowing the right scaffolding technique or the right meaning while teaching abstract words, the teachers

chose to use L1. L1 can be a scaffold for less proficient learners and for less experienced teachers.

In order to gather profound views on the use of L1 in EFL classroom in Balkh University, the present study tries to fill the gap by examining EFL teachers' reasons for the use of L1 in EFL classes at Balkh University.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach. Semi- structured interviews were carried out with 5 language educators from English Department of Balkh University who were selected purposively. As the study intends to find the reason for EFL teachers' L1 use in EFL classrooms, the questions that were asked from teachers were mainly about their viewpoints about the reason for their use of L1 in EFL classes and the circumstances where they use and consider use of L1 necessary (adapted from Al Sharaeai, 2012). The interview was conducted individually and the data was analyzed based on the analysis of the interview content.

Participants

Participants for this study were 5 English educators with teaching experience of 10-15 years from English Language and Literature Department of Balkh University. For selection of the participants, purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014) was used due to proximity, easy accessibility and availability of the school and participants for the researchers.

Data Collection

For data collection purpose, a semi-structured interview was administered to 5 EFL language educators. To collect the data for the study, an open-ended interview was used as the research instrument. According to Lankshear and Knobble (2004), interview can be a valuable tool to compile ample information about the study. It can be presumed that it is the most useful tool for generating comprehensive information comparing to any other data collection tools since it gives the interviewer a remarkable opportunity to investigate and clarify in depth information on the interested topic. In this study, the interview was conducted individually and face to face in English. Participants responses were audio recorded making use of mobile phone recorders and transcribed for data analysis. The interview questions were designed to attain detailed information about the reasons for EFL teachers L1 use in EFL classrooms at Balkh University.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed by the means of content analysis based on the emergent themes. The findings were categorized under specific themes based on the research question and the related literature. The main theme is the reasons for L1 use in EFL classrooms. The participants' responses that were considered to be important were combined under the appropriate codes. The codes were put in descendant order from the most common to the least. The percentages for the codes were calculated and presented opposite to each code under the specified theme. To preserve participants' anonymity, they are named as " P1 (participant 1), P2 (participant 2) , P3 (participant 3) , P4 (participant 4) and P5(participant 5)" in the finding, discussion and upcoming sections of the paper.

Finding and Discussion

The finding from this study shows that EFL language educators at Balkh University use L1 in their classes despite their viewpoint that TL should only be used in EFL classes. The results of the study are discussed based on the information gathered from the interview with the selected participants. As a vast amount of data will be collected through interviews and any set of qualitative data collection approach. Not all the data collected are related. The focus is therefore on exploring and analyzing the data relevant to the purpose and corresponding research question. Thus, the objective of the study is employed as the main theme to interpret the gathered data and the data obtained from semi-structured interview are analyzed and concluded in the coded themes as follows.

Reasons for Afghan teachers' L1 use in EFL classrooms	Participants	Percentage
Use of L1 as a pedagogical tool for clarification	5P (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5)	100%
Use of L1 to establish rapport	5P (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5)	100%
Learners Proficiency Level as a factor in determining the degree of L1 use	4P (P1, P2, P4, P5)	80%
Curriculum or syllabus demands for L2 achievements	3P (P2, P3, P5)	60%

Table 1. Percentages of the participants responses based on to the coded themes.

As shown in the table above, all the teachers interviewed agreed to the use of L1 in their classes when it is needed. They stated different purposes for their use of L1 in EFL classrooms. Their claims behind the reasons for the use of L1 in EFL classrooms indicates that almost all the interviewed teachers use L1 as a pedagogical tool for clarification. The teachers use L1 for translation specially to define new vocabulary in the classroom. The relevant responses from teachers show that they use L1 for explaining grammar and for checking learners' comprehension. On top of that, most teachers find it more convenient ways for explaining abstract concepts and culture of the target language. One relevant response from the teachers is as follow.

“The use of L1 for explaining abstract ideas and grammatical aspects of the language is a positive approach since as language instructors it helps us to clarify the difficult concepts of the language such as grammar or vocabulary.” (P2)

Correspondingly, the interviewed teachers also justified their use of L1 for establishing rapport with student. Teachers' responses from interview show that apart from management matters, L1 can best be used for establishing rapport with students. Additionally, L1 use makes

error correction and feedback provision easier on learners' performance. One excerpt from teachers is.

"L1 is a great socialization tool that is employed by teachers to develop a good relationship with the learners apart from managing the classroom in terms of keeping discipline in the classroom." (P4)

More than half of the teachers (80 %) justify the reason for L1 use in EFL classes because of learners' low level of language proficiency in English. Teachers claim that they do not want to intimidate the weak learners. However, if learners are at advanced level, teachers choose to minimize use of L1. So, their choice of L1 use depends largely on their learners' level. One excerpt from teachers' responses is as follow;

"The use of L1 is high if learners' proficiency level is very low." (P1)

About third of the teachers (60%) believe that use of L1 can help them save time and meet syllabus demands. In most cases, both teachers and learners are pressured to complete the requirements of the curriculum within the given time; thus, it is a common belief that using L1 saves time. One excerpt from teachers' responses is as follow:

"Teachers compromise using L1 for non-language purposes, such as; discipline, giving instructions and guidance to save class time." (P5)

The finding from the study shows that Afghan EFL teachers at Balkh University use L1 in their classes for different purposes, namely, for clarification as a pedagogical tool, for establishing rapport, discipline and class management, based on curriculum and syllabus demand and per need of students' level of language proficiency. The finding from this study is in line with Cook (2001) who proposed that L1 is mostly used in EFL classes to explain grammar, convey meaning, check meanings of words or sentences, maintain discipline, organize the class, build rapport with students and test them; and Pablo (2011) who found that L1 is used for clarification, building good communication with students based on students language proficiency in English classes as foreign language classroom in Central Mexico.

Conclusion

The current study intended to investigate reasons for Afghan teachers' L1 use in EFL classroom at English Department of Balkh University, particularly when giving instruction. In fact, language educators at Balkh University use students' first language for different reasons and give rational for their claims. Many of the teachers responded that they use L1 as a pedagogical tool for clarification particularly for better understanding of the lessons when they teach difficult aspects of the language such as grammar and vocabulary. They believe that the use of L1 can help for establishing rapport as it seems more relaxing for students, and they like it when their first language is used in the class. However, it cannot be ignored that there were teachers who contradicted that proficiency level should be considered as a factor in determining the degree of L1 use. In this group of points of view, the use of first language only works while teaching grammar, but it does not improve students' speaking ability. They believe that the use of target language is paramount importance for students as curriculum demands for L2 achievements to learn grammar points, and it is very necessary that students speak English

while communicating in the class. As a result, the use of students' L1 cannot be neither underused nor overused in English language classrooms.

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