



SCRUTINIZING THE REASONS FOR USING FIRST LANGUAGE IN EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Using first language in the English class remains a controversial and an interesting issue to investigate, since it becomes an inevitable phenomenon especially in EFL contexts. Thus, this present study aims to investigate the underlying reasons for using L1 by both students and teacher in the EFL classrooms. In this case study, semi-structured interview was used to collect the data from the teacher and the students related to the reasons of using L1 in EFL classrooms. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the data. The research results showed that the teachers generally used L1 because they believed that it supported the effective process of language teaching, since it can avoid students' confusion over the materials being discussed, and it can make the students feel more comfortable in joining teaching and learning process. Meanwhile, the students used L1 mostly because of their natural habit, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes due to their low proficiency level in using English. Additionally, they also consider that using L1 was easier to communicate their ideas. In conclusion, L1 plays some supportive roles in English class. However, its use must be re-examined, since it should be used appropriately to achieve the better learning outcomes.

Keywords : First Language, EFL classroom, language teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

Learning a language is a difficult and often frustrating process for many learners especially at lower level (Atkinson, 1993). Thus, learning English in EFL contexts requires the students and the teachers to spend more effort in overcoming the problems they face during the instruction to achieve the desired learning goals. In this case, using first language (L1) becomes a common and an inevitable phenomenon in classroom interaction during teaching and learning process (Harmer, 2001; Brown, 2007), especially in EFL context at which English is only taught in schools (Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill & Pincas, 2003). However, this phenomenon is a controversial issue, which causing the emergence of two contrasting viewpoints about whether or not first language should be used in English classroom (Schweers, 1999; Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2001, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Tang, 2002). Therefore, both teachers and students are suggested to have careful consideration in using L1 in English class.

However, the use of L1 in English class is a controversial issue that raises two contrasting views about whether or not L1 should be used in English class (Schweers, 1999; Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2001, Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; Tang, 2002, Karimian & Mohammadi, 2015). On one side, there is an assumption that using L1 in English class is

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beneficial for it has several advantages that can support the foreign language learning (Schweers, 1999; Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Nation, 2003). Furthermore, using L1 in learning second or foreign language is very helpful for certain aspects of language learning (Jan, Li and Lin, 2014). Using L1 is also considered as an effective strategy for helping the students gaining better understanding (Brooks and Donato, 1994 in Mart, 2013; Nation, 2003; Li, 2012; Adnan & Mohamad, 2014). It also allows the students to say what they really want to say (Bolitho, 1983 in Mart, 2013; Harbord, 1992). Besides, according to Brook and Donato (1994) as cited in Halasa and Al-Manaseer (2012), L1 use is a normal psycholinguistic process that facilitates L2 production and allows the learner both to initiate and sustain verbal interaction with one another. Furthermore, it is also found to be useful in checking students' understanding, explaining some grammar points, and teaching vocabulary (Harmer 2001; Nation, 2003). Therefore, first language actually facilitates both the teachers and students to communicate their ideas and comprehend the learning materials more clearly and easily during teaching and learning process in English class.

On the other side, L1 is suggested to be avoided in the English class, because it can interfere the process of mastering the target language (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1985). In line with this, Harmer (2001) believes that the overuse of L1 can restrict students' exposure to the target language. Additionally, in EFL context, classroom is commonly the only place in which they get the exposure of the target language, thus the use of L2 must be maximized (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). Furthermore, there is also an assumption that to be successful in L2 acquisition, L2 should be separated from L1 (Cook, 2001; Halasa and Al-Manaseer, 2012; Littlewood and Yu, 2011). If first language is dominantly used by the teachers and the students in English class, the target language exposure may be limited. Thus, it is obvious that students' first language usually influence their second language acquisition (Harmer, 2001).

Several studies such as those that were conducted by Kim and Petraki (2009), Tang (2002), Afzal (2013), and Khati (2011) indicated that L1 plays a supportive role in language classroom. It was found useful for explaining the meaning of words and grammar points, giving instruction and maintaining social atmosphere. However, in some cases it led to a tendency of the overuse of L1 which might interfere second language acquisition. Hence, it can be concluded that careful, moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue can aid and facilitate target language teaching and learning (Tang, 2002; Jan, Li & Lin, 2014).

However, there are still some appropriate use of L1 in English class, such as for checking comprehension (Harmer, 2001; Schweers, 1999; Atkinson, 1987), giving instruction (Atkinson, 1987; Auerbach, 1993 in Khati, 2011; Tang, 2002), explaining complex concepts (Yu, 2011; Brooks and Donato, 1994 in Mart, 2013; Nation, 2003; Li, 2012; Adnan & Mohamad, 2014; Tang 2002), explaining errors (Auerbach, 1993 in Khati, 2011), explaining meaning of words (Tang, 2002; Khati, 2011), motivating the students (Adnan & Mohamad, 2014), and maintaining social atmosphere in the classroom (Harmer, 2001; Harbord, 1992; Adnan & Mohamad, 2014; Schweers, 1999). Meanwhile, Afzal (2013) mentions some functions of L1 used by the students which cover clarifying question and meaning of words in L2, finding new words in L2, express their frustration, processing complex concepts, and discussing meaning while evaluating written task. In this regards, it is important to investigate and reveal the underlying reasons of why the teachers and the students use L1 during the English instruction. It is expected that through this study the use of L1 in English classroom can be evaluated to find out its contribution in students' second language acquisition. The researchers believe that it must be used adequately in accordance with the need to assist and facilitate the target language learning.

METHODS

This study is conducted at one of the junior high schools located in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia. Using case study as the research method, this study involved two English

teachers in that school, who have more than 15 years of teaching experience, and 9 students from the seventh until the ninth grade (3 students of each grade) of junior high school as the participants who shared the same L1 as their mother tongue, which is Sundanese Language. The students are chosen based on the different level of activeness (very active, medium, and less active) in the English class. Semi-structured interview was used as the technique to collect the data related to the reasons of using Sundanese Language as L1 during teaching and learning process in the English class by both the teachers and the students. Meanwhile, to analyze the data, this study used the thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) which covers six steps including familiarising the data, generating initial codes (Coding), searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study attempts to investigate the reasons for using L1 by both the teachers and the students during the English instruction. During the teaching and learning process, both the teachers and the students used their L1 for several purposes that could support the effectiveness of the instruction. In general, Table 1 below shows the students' and teachers' main reasons for using L1 during teaching and learning process in the English class.

Table 1 Reasons for Using L1 in English Class

Teachers	Students
Supporting roles of L1	Habit
Avoiding confusion among the students	Ease of Use
Making students feel more Comfortable	Better Understanding
	Shyness
	Lack of English Proficiency
	Fear of Making Mistakes

Teachers' Reasons for Using L1

The result of two interviews toward the English teachers showed that they admitted L1 use in English class played a supportive role that could facilitate them and overcome some problems in conducting teaching and learning process. In this regards, some experts such as Schweers (1999), Tang (2002), Brown (2007) and Harmer (2001) believe that using L1 is very beneficial and useful to support language learning. Furthermore, the teachers used L1 because sometimes it could help them explaining the meaning of words and difficult and/or complex materials. Besides, using L1 could also avoid confusion among the students, which in turn might help them gain better understanding. Adnan and Mohamad (2014) argue that students will understand better when the explanations of the subject matters are given in their own language. Thus, the teachers use L1 to enhance students' comprehension, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 1

In my English class, it is impossible to force the students to fully speak English, because in some cases even if we have used Bahasa Indonesia, they still do not understand the given materials, so I often use Sundanese, as their first language to explain the materials. (Interview transcript with Teacher1. Translated by the researcher, November 24th, 2021)

Moreover, the teachers also mentioned that in general, the students' English proficiency in that school were still low. The result of their average scores in final exam were still under the minimum criteria set for English subject in that school. As a result, it led them to use L1 during the instruction to help the students obtain the better understanding. In line this regards, the use of L1 with novices has verified to be a very useful and valuable device in enhancing students' understanding (Adnan and Mohamad, 2014).

Accordingly, from the teachers' point of view, they could not avoid the using L1 and monitored its use by the students. It is because they considered that in general, the students in that school had low proficiency level in English and still needed their guidance by using L1. Besides, according to the teachers, most of the students were less motivated to learn English. Thus, instead of leaving the students struggle to use the target language, for example to relate L1 structures to EFL structures, it seems plausible to guide learners wherever guidance is necessary (Nazary, 2008). In this case, the guidance given by the teachers is by using the first language.

Additionally, the teachers also believed that they might use Sundanese Language in some occasions during teaching and learning process, because it is the students' mother tongue.

Excerpt 2

I'm just having fun (using L1 in English class), that's okay. It doesn't affect the teaching and learning process in class, it will lead to an enjoyable learning. Yes, it is fun to use Sundanese language because it is also their language. (Interview transcript with Teacher2. Translated by the researcher, November 24th, 2021)

Excerpt 2 indicates that the teacher used L1 in order to make the students feel more comfortable in learning the language. In this regards, using L1 provides sense of security and validates the learners lived experiences allowing them to express themselves. Using L1 can also maintain the teachers relationships with the students, which in turn may create the more enjoyable and friendly learning atmosphere (Schweers, 1999; Harmer, 2001; Adnan & Mohamad, 2014). It is in line with the result of a study conducted by Pablo, Lengeling, Zenil, Crawford, & Goodwin (2011) that indicate the teachers used L1 to build a close rapport with the students, in order to create a learning environment that enables the students to confidently participate in English class. It is expected that by using first language, the learning process can be more enjoyable, which in turn can encourage the students to be more active in participating during the learning activities.

Additionally, in this study, the teachers also believed that if it is used appropriately, using L1 can reinforce the target language learning. This is in line with the result of a study conducted by Pablo, Lengeling, Zenil, Crawford, & Goodwin (2011), which indicate that L1 plays an important role in the teaching-learning processes, especially in foreign language contexts. It can be seen in the Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3

I think first language (Sundanese Language) can be used in English class depending on the situation when it is needed, because in some cases it can help me teach them more effectively. (T1)

I think that in learning English, in some occasions, Sundanese language helps me to conduct the more effective teaching and learning process. For example, when I try to explain certain vocabulary items in English, it is easier to use Sundanese language and the students can also understand the meaning of the words more easily if I doing so. (T2) (Interview transcript. Translated by the researcher, November 24th, 2021)

In this case, Jan, Li and Lin (2014) agree that the teachers' use of the mother tongue was perceived particularly helpful for certain aspects of language learning. Therefore, when it is used wisely, it can support the English teaching and learning.

To sum up, the findings indicated that the teachers' reasons for using L1 was because their consideration towards the supporting roles of L1 in English class. It can facilitate them in several occasions, such as in explaining difficult concepts and explaining the meaning of some words in the target language. They also used L1 to avoid students' confusion and to make the students feel more comfortable in learning English in order to

maintain good rapport with the students. By doing so, it is expected that the more effective learning process can be promoted.

Students' Reasons for Using L1

On the other hand, the students explained six main reasons for using L1 in English class. Firstly, because the location of the school and the place where they live are in a rural area, Sundanese language is the language they use in their daily lives for communicating with the people around them, such as with their family, neighbours, including their friends and the teachers. Thus, using L1 in English class is also considered as a natural thing to do (Harmer, 2001). Accordingly, the result of Alshehri's (2017) study reveal that L1 use is a natural occurrence amongst speakers who share the same mother tongue. In this regard, most of the students argued that they often used their L1 automatically and unconsciously in English class, as can be seen in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 4

I use Sundanese language in my daily basis, so it becomes my habit. That is why I often use the language automatically to interact with my friend, even in the English Class. (S1)
(Interview transcript. Translated by the researcher, November 22th, 2021)

Secondly, they assumed that using L1 was easier rather than using English. In English there are so many rules and aspects that they should consider, such as grammar, spelling and pronunciation. In this case, according to the students, Sundanese language is seen as the more effective language to use for communicating their ideas even in English class. It is because they had mastered the language better as they had learned it since they were born. According to Harbord (1992), using L1 can enhance and keep the flow of communication during learning activities. Therefore, for the low proficiency students, to avoid communication block, they may use L1 to deliver their thoughts more effectively.

Excerpt 5

I cannot speak in English fluently. It is very difficult for me. I often confuse when I want to communicate what I have in my mind by using English. I think it is easier for me to use Sundanese Language (first language) to communicate my idea in the classroom because I use it in my daily life, and I master the language better than English. (S3)
(Interview transcript. Translated by the researcher, November 22th, 2021)

In addition, they also stated that using L1 was more understandable. Chastain (1971) as stated in Nazary (2008) believes that meaningful learning takes place when the learners comprehend the materials and can relate it to their present knowledge system. Using L1 can facilitate the students in comprehending some concepts explained by their teachers and their friends more easily. Therefore, it can enhance their understanding which can also indicate the success of the teaching and learning process. They also emphasized that they did not agree if the teachers prohibit them to use their L1 in English class. They suggested the teachers to use their L1 in the equal amount as the target language in conducting teaching and learning process, since they thought that it helped them to communicate their ideas and comprehend the learning materials.

The other reason was because of their lack of English proficiency. This point is actually relates with the rest reasons, which are shy, and afraid of making mistakes. The students realized that they had poor English mastery. Thus, they did not really confident to perform their ability in using English. As evidenced in Excerpt 5 above. They were also afraid of making mistakes, because it often brought about some negative comments and laughter from the teachers and the other students.

Excerpt 6

I prefer to use Sundanese language, because I am afraid if my friends will think that I am showing off. I'm embarrassed if my English is incorrect, because later I'm afraid of being teased by others. (S7) (Interview transcript. Translated by the researcher, November 22th, 2021)

In this regards, as can be seen in Excerpt 6 that this phenomenon makes them think that using English as the target language can be the source of embarrassment especially for shy learners and those who feel that they are not proficient in mastering the target language (Nation, 2003). Hence, during the interview, the students claimed that they tended to avoid using English as the target language in English subject, unless they were required by the teachers to use it.

There were some factors that may affect those phenomena, such as the cultural, social and economical status. Most of the students in that area rarely continued their study to the higher level. They preferred to find jobs after graduating from junior high school. Thus, they were not really motivated to learn English, because they do not find the importance of it in their daily lives. The interview results also showed that only few of them admitted that English is important for their future, such as if they want to go abroad for working or continuing their study. Meanwhile, most of them think that English is important only to pass the exam as the requirement to graduate from the school.

To sum up, those are some reasonable factors, which can be the basis for consideration by both the teachers and the students to use of L1 in English class. However, those reasons should be taken into account to evaluate the use of first language to support the acquisition of the target language, and promote the more effective teaching and learning process.

CONCLUSION

Using first language in EFL classroom is still a controversial issue. However, when it is used appropriately, first language can facilitate the target language learning. This study aim to reveal the reasons for using L1 in EFL classrooms by both the teachers and the students. Based on the results of the interviews, the teachers used L1 based on their consideration that L1 has some supportive roles in language teaching and it can avoid confusion among the students. They also believed that using L1 could make the students feel more comfortable in joining the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, the students revealed six main reasons for using L1. Firstly, they used L1 because it was their habit in their daily lives. Besides, they also considered that using L1 was easier than using target language to communicate their ideas. In addition, using L1 helped them gaining the better understanding rather than by using the target language during teaching and learning process. Moreover, they were shy and afraid of making mistakes due to their lack of English proficiency. However, since the result of this study indicated that both the teachers and the students emphasized the benefits of L1 use in English class, especially for the low proficiency students, the disadvantages of excessive use of L1 cannot be ignored, because it may affect students' achievement and motivation in learning English. Therefore, L1 use must be re-examined and used appropriately to support and facilitate the more effective teaching and learning process in order to attain the better learning outcome.

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