

Towards the Delimitation of the Excessive Use of the Mother Tongue in the Algerian EFL Learners' Oral Production: A Case Study of 3rd year Level in Secondary Education, the Province of JIJEL

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Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the use of the mother tongue (Arabic) and its functions in the EFL secondary school classes in the province of Jijel in Algeria. The aim of the present study is to investigate the extent to which the EFL teachers and their learners use Arabic during the teaching/learning process, and how this use affects the development of the learners' oral skill. This study is an attempt to find out whether they (teachers and learners) consider the use of L1 as a means to facilitate and foster the development of speaking skill, or whether it is a resort used by the teachers and their learners to conceal the deficiencies in the teacher's teaching practices and the learners' language production. The study is conducted in seven secondary schools throughout the province of Jijel, with 12 teachers, observing almost 500 students. Both quantitative and qualitative research instruments are employed, namely questionnaires and classroom observations, in addition to unplanned interviews with the teachers. The researcher suggests techniques that are expected to make the use of L1 more restricted, but more effective in facilitating and paving the way for the development of the learner's oral production.

Keywords: Speaking Skill, Mother Tongue, L1 Functions, EFL Classes of Jijel

1. Introduction

The use of the mother tongue in a class where the teacher and the learners share the same native language may very likely be inevitable. According to Freeman (2000, pp. 101-102) "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". Because of the minimal use of English in an EFL class between the teacher and the learners, and among the learners themselves during the session, it should be used intensively in the class by the teacher, so that learners get used to it, in other words the more English is practised in the classroom the more the learners learn it. It is true that the use of the native language can be fruitful and helpful in some occasions in the teaching/learning process; however, excessive use of it may result in negative outcomes. Only moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue is helpful and can facilitate the learning and teaching of the target language (Tang, 2000).

In an EFL classroom English is the targeted language, thus, it should be the only means of communication, the use of English should be intensive and the learners should be immersed in the language they are learning. The optimal use of English by the teachers may help the learners learn new vocabulary, new structures, and new phrases and expressions very quickly. However, repeated use of the native language delimits the use of the target language, consequently wasting the opportunities for students to be exposed to the foreign language. Atkinson (1987), Nation (2003) and Cook (2001) point out the danger of overuse of the mother tongue in language classes as it would lead to the translation of most language items into L1.

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The authors warn that using the mother tongue in the classroom reduces the amount of input and the opportunity of practice. Furthermore, they point out the importance of modelling the target language and encouraging FL use (Turan Pakera & Özlem, 2015).

2. Aims of the Study

This study aims to investigate:

- ✓ The amount of L1 use by both teachers and learners.
 - ✓ The reasons behind the teachers' use of L1, in other words, whether L1 use is affected by specific variables.
- a) Level of the class
 - b) The teachers' teaching experience
 - c) The difficulty of the lesson content
- ✓ How the use of L1 affects the learners' oral skill (speaking).

3. Methodology

This study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative designs. The researcher administered a teacher questionnaire, a learner questionnaire, and conducted classroom observations. 32 secondary school teachers and 102 high school final grade (BAC) learners first completed the questionnaires, and then the observation process took place throughout 24 sessions with 12 teachers and almost 500 students. It is important to note that the participants who completed the questionnaires were also involved in the observations. The researcher also managed to have four informal interviews and discussions with the teachers before and after the sessions attended, this was quite helpful and fruitful in the current study, noting that those discussions helped obtain information that were not accessible through the use of the questionnaire and the observations. Variables including age, gender, and the like were overlooked in the current process, only teaching experience was taken into account, regarding its significance in answering one basic question in the present research.

4. Analysis Procedure

This part of the article is devoted to the analysis and the discussion of the data collected from the questionnaire and the classroom observations. The procedure followed to analyze the data gathered through the questionnaire consisted of the analysis of question items separately followed by a correlation of the findings generated by different question items where necessary.

Although the teachers, who completed the questionnaires and with whom the researcher attended the sessions, were randomly selected, there was, fortunately, a variance in the teaching experience and the qualifications they hold. The observations time was restricted by the concerned authority (14 days as maximum), and no tools (no tape recorder nor video recorder) were allowed, however, the researcher had the opportunity to have some interviews with most of the teachers and took notes on every word they uttered. Their remarks, explanations, and even complains were quite helpful and fruitful.

The researcher used structured observation with the help of an observation checklist (grid) adopted from another study on the same topic (The efficiency of CBA in developing the learners' speaking skill: a case of third year students). The study was conducted by Fatima-Zohra Imane Omari at the University of Telemcen in 2015. While using the observation grid the researcher took notes using an unstructured observation method and had several side interviews with the teachers.

The Class observation took place during two weeks (From 30th September to 13th October 2017) thus, the researcher made the investigation in a short period of time, as she was not allowed to attend the EFL sessions more than that limited period. The observation went on during the 2017/2018 academic year. The learners were informed that the researcher was preparing a PhD thesis without knowing the purpose behind her visit to the classes. During these sessions, the researcher was sitting at the back of the classroom, pupils were facing their teachers in order not to draw the pupils' attention or minimize their spontaneity (Omari, 2015, p.128). However, the presence of the researcher may affect the behaviour of the individuals being observed which is described as the "observer effect" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992 as cited in Omari)

For the structured observation grid, a rating scale was used for the target phenomenon called "Likert scale"¹ where a range of responses were proposed for a given statement. The Ratings is on a five-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, very often, and always).

The checklist adopted (see page 11) and used by the researcher of the present thesis was divided into different sections, each of which was related to a different objective containing specific questions that serve a given purpose.

5. The use of the mother tongue in the EFL classes in Jijel

The teachers and the learners' answers to the questionnaires' questions and the observations conducted in the Algerian EFL English sessions attended by the researcher were quite frustrating. Their answers were not compatible with the actual practice inside the classrooms. There was too much use of Arabic by both teachers and learners.

The teachers very often gave the Arabic equivalents of the new or the difficult words, instead of using other techniques of explanations, such simplifying the meaning, providing a synonym or antonym, using gestures, or using the word in an example. They also used Arabic when they talked about things that are not related to the lesson, telling jokes or funny stories, registering the absences, asking the learners to stop making noise and asking them to do their activities.

The researcher also noted that the learners, on their part, did not hesitate to answer in Arabic at all; they gave the impression that they are used to this and that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the use of their native language when learning English. Another point that was noticed was that whenever a learner answered in Arabic, the teachers did not seem to be unsatisfied, instead they replied, "yes, that's right" or "good" while, they could have asked their learners to stop using their mother tongue and to rather use English, by simply saying "right, but next time use English to answer" or "try not to use Arabic". Some teachers could approach the researcher's position towards the use of Arabic, arguing that some words (abstract words for example) cannot be explained by simply using the techniques mentioned above. The researcher, in this case, would suggest the use of the dictionary- an English/English dictionary of course- as an excellent alternative.

The use of the dictionary was entirely absent in all the sessions except for one, in which the teacher gave the dictionary to a different student each time a new or a difficult word is faced during the lesson, the teacher then asked the pupil to check the difficult word and read it aloud to classmates. This technique is fruitful in a way that it helps find the exact meaning for the words, and it teaches and encourages the pupils to use the dictionary whenever they face difficulties with vocabulary, it becomes a positive beneficial learning habit. In addition to this, it teaches them how to depend on themselves in their learning and stop being spoon-fed by the teacher.

The repeated use of Arabic during the lesson conveys the impression that the teacher does not take the learners' learning of the foreign language seriously. In other words, a teacher who strongly believes that his or her learners need and have to learn to speak English and to become fluent and autonomous would insist on the use of English solely during the lesson. He or she would try hard to create and provide more opportunities for the learners to hear English being spoken during the lesson, in which the only person that can be providing this chance is the teacher, since there are, unfortunately, no other learning resources, tools or media available in the EFL classes in the Algerian secondary schools.

When the researcher of the present study inquired about the excessive use of Arabic, which, if not stopped would become a teaching/learning phenomenon in the field of EFL in Algeria, the teachers argued that they were, in most cases, obliged to use the native language. In other words, the low level of the learners drives them to use Arabic very often because the learners do not understand English, as they should normally do after 7 years of English academic learning.

Based on what the researcher had observed during the observation sessions and what she deduced from the questionnaires answered by both the teachers and the learners, she admits that the teachers are, to some extent, truthful in their assumption and confirm that the general level of the learners in English, especially in speaking, is very bad. However, the researcher does not support them arguing that they are obliged to use Arabic because of the low level of the students, this is in fact a fallacious argument.

6. Results and Discussions

Regarding the first question of the present study as to how much L1 is used during the lesson, the data collected from the observations and the questionnaires revealed that the teachers and the learners use their native language only when necessary, and mostly when talking about things which are not related to the lesson, they gave examples of telling jokes, a story that just happened, administrative information, announcement and the like. They also voiced that the use of Arabic is very limited in comparison to the target language.

However, the observations of their actual practice in the classrooms showed that they use the mother tongue frequently. In fact, the researcher noticed that the instructors use Arabic as a means to teach the target language. The teachers use it to present the lesson topic, to explain grammar rules and difficult words, to give instructions, and to assign projects. They also use the L1 to talk about things that are out of the context of the lesson.

The use of L1 was not limited to the teachers alone; the students also used it too much. What the students stated in the questionnaire was different from what they actually performed in the classrooms. According to the data collected, the majority of the learners' answers were in Arabic.

They use L1 to ask their teachers for more clarification, to ask for permission to go out (to the toilet, answering an important phone call...etc.) to remind their teachers of the last point they dealt with in the preceding session, or to give excuses for their absence in the previous sessions. In a nutshell, their use of English was very limited.

As for the reasons behind the use of L1 in the classes, the teachers stated in the questionnaires and also in the interviews that their use of the mother tongue depended on the level of the class. Only one teacher stated that the difficulty of the lesson content obliges the teacher to use L1.

Based on the data collected from the observations, the researcher supports the teachers in their assumptions. It was, in fact, noticed that some teachers did not use the first language in the same way with all the classes, the researcher observed that they use more Arabic with classes in which the students had a low level in English and who were not participating in the lesson. On the other hand, they used less L1 with classes in which the students were active and participating with the teacher. However, this does not extend to all the teachers; some teachers used the mother tongue quite equally in different classes, the use of the first language was actually part of their teaching practices.

Regarding teaching experience, according to the data collected in the present research, the researcher can safely confirm that the teacher' experience does not affect the use of the L1 in any manner. The researcher attended English sessions with teachers with expertise in English language teaching, some of those teachers used too much Arabic, and some of them did not, likewise, those teachers who did not have extensive experience or have very little experience in English language teaching were using L1 in different frequency. That is to say, teaching experience is overlooked as a variable in the present study.

Finally, the data obtained revealed that the content of the lesson had a slight relation to the use of the mother tongue. It was noticed that Arabic was used more with contents that were complicated, for example presenting a new topic, or explaining abstract words, however, it was used less in grammar lessons that deals with simple grammatical rules. Again, this does not apply to all the teachers, as reported above some teachers use the L1 in whatever the case is.

As to the last question that asks about the influence of the use of the mother tongue on the learners' oral skill development, the study results showed that these two variables are positively and directly correlated. Experts in the field of language learning and teaching have different views regarding the use of L1 in foreign language learning. Some of them have rejected any use of L1 in EFL learning classes (Atkinson, 1987) while others have advocated the use of L1 as an efficient way to make it easy for the students to understand the target language (Nation, 2005). One may admit that moderate use of the native language supports foreign language learning; it can facilitate the job for the teachers helping them to transmit information in an easier and quicker way.

However, this use can be fruitful when the ultimate goal behind learning the target language is not communicative, that is to say, when the foreign language is being learnt for a purely communicative goal -which is the case in Algeria- the use of the native language becomes an impediment to the development of the learners' communicative skills in the target language. According to Larsen-Freeman, (2012) judicious use of the students' native language is permitted in CLT classes. She further believes that, wherever possible, the target language should be used not only during communicative activities, but also for explaining the activities to the students or in assigning homework. The students learn from these classroom management exchanges, too, and they realize that the target language is a vehicle for communication, not just an object to be studied (as cited in Kalanzadeh et al, 2013). Furthermore, she (2000) states that the role of L1 use will depend on the method that is being carried out (128), when using FL for communicative purposes "either, promising, inviting, and declining invitation within a social context".

Excessive use of the target language by the teacher can be a motivating factor for the students to try to use it themselves; in fact, an EFL teacher is usually the role model for the students with regard to learning the language s/he is teaching them. When the teacher insists on the use of the target language solely and encourages the learners to use it, they will get used to it, they will stop translating in their minds into the native language and start to think in the target language. Moreover, they will be more motivated to learn to speak the target language; students usually enjoy listening to their teacher speaking the foreign language despite that they do not understand everything. Kalanzadeh et al wrote:

The use of the L1 in an EFL classroom takes two directions. One direction argues students feel unmotivated to use FL and that the use of L1 affects the comprehensible input they receive. The other claims the use of L1 may be useful in early stages to both guarantee the understanding of classroom instructions and engage students in the classroom, thus promote learning. Nation (2003, p. 2) argues that L1 has a little but significant role referring to communication, meaning and content (p.36).

As for the Algerian context, particularly the province in which the study took place (Jijel), the findings of the study revealed that the use of the mother tongue is affecting FL learning negatively. The ultimate goal of the English course within the frame of the approach of competency-based method followed in the Algerian educational system is purely communicative. Algerian learners are supposed to acquire communicative abilities, develop interactive skills, and reach autonomy in foreign language learning. Thus, the use of the native language is normally very restricted; it should be rarely used, only in necessary situations. The teachers should normally use the target language excessively so that they teach their learners the content of the course, which they are obliged to teach and finish on time, in addition to teaching them the language that is used for communicative purposes. When the students hear only English for three or four hours per week, which is the time allotted to English sessions, the chance to learn how to use English to interact with others, which is to communicate, will automatically increase. However, the findings of the current study showed that the EFL teachers use too much L1 and their learners do not hesitate to use it themselves, simply because they are not being stopped or asked to use English instead. To sum up, the EFL teachers' perceptions about the use of the mother tongue do not reflect their actual practices in the classrooms, their way of dealing with the L1 in teaching English is a direct impediment to the development of the learners interactive skills.

Conclusion

It is recommended using the target language most of the time, in order to provide more amount of the FL input, and create more opportunities to listen to the target language. The more FL is used and practiced the most it is learnt, and likewise, the less it is used the less it is learnt. This study disclosed that EFL teachers in the province of Jijel use too much L1; this use stems from mainly two reasons: first, the low level of the learners in English which obliges the teachers to speak in Arabic, in order to facilitate understanding and accelerate learning to finish the programme that they ought to finish before the final exam (BAC). Second, the continuous and repeated use of Arabic when teaching

English turned into a teaching practice for most of the EFL teachers which carries with it great risks, as discussed. This current study also revealed that despite the benefits of the use of the L1 in teaching the target language, it is negatively affecting the teaching of English in Jijel, simply because the goal behind the English language learning in the country is purely communication. Finally, this study might pave the road for subsequent larger studies about a serious topic as the one in hand, therefore, more participants and more data could provide more perceptions about the use of the L1 in teaching FL, and disclose new factors behind this use. Such studies might be conducive to figuring out constructive solutions to the issue.

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Appendix

N	Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Veryoften	Always
1.	Does the teacher provide opportunities to the pupils to interact orally in the classroom?					
2.	Does the teacher make sure that each pupils interacts orally in the classroom?					
3.	Does the teacher guide the pupils while interacting orally?					
4.	Is the teacher an active partner while interacting ?					
5.	When the pupils have difficulties finding words while interacting orally, does the teacher help them by supplying the word?					
6.	Does the teacher encourage the learners in oral interactions?					
7.	Does the teacher interact with the pupils only in English or does s/he uses the mother tongue?					
8.	Does the teacher organize or arrange the class in pairs or in groups during speakingactivities?					
9.	Does the teacher brainstorm the speaking activity before letting them work?					
10.	Does the teacher teach the learners inference and interpreting skills?					
11.	Does the teacher teach how to paraphrase in a conversation ?					
12.	Does the teacher teach the pupils to relate personal experience or background knowledge to classroom interaction?					
13.	Does the teacher teach how to interact orally even though they lack vocabulary?					
14.	Does the teacher teach the pupils to find a synonym if they cannot find the exact word?					
15.	Does the teacher emphasize on grammar and structure correctness during oralactivities?					
16.	Does the teacher point out to thedifferent mistakes during the oral interaction?					
17.	Does the teacher provide activities in relation with real life situations?					
18.	Does the teacher provide his pupils with activities that promote speaking such as discussions, role plays, interviews, etc.?					
19.	Does the teacher use audio visual aids in speaking activities?					