

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Mother Tongue in Teaching and Learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Classes



Linguistics

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Abstract

This paper addresses a major issue in the South East European University in teaching ESP classes, where students' and teachers' perceptions are taken into account in designing a suitable teaching methodology. The article examines data from self-administered questionnaires and interviews to show the existence of the preferences of using Albanian as a facilitating tool in ESP classes and ways to improve the teaching methodology in such classrooms. The data would also show the journalistic approach of How, How much, and When to use Albanian in English classes.

Introduction

First language (L1) use in second language acquisition (SLA) is at issue. Extensive research has been carried out in the area of native language influence on the target language and a large number of terms are used when the influence of the native language is discussed, positive and negative transfer. In this research a number of dimensions are addressed: students' perspective on mother tongue use, teachers' perspective on mother tongue use, and strategies for encouraging use of the target language and relevant implications for teaching methodology. My study is about the role that mother language plays in second/foreign language acquisition in general and particularly its role in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These ESP courses are designed to help students coming from different faculties, like: Law faculty following lectures in English; Business faculty students following their lectures in English; Communication and IT students following their lectures in English. This article will reveal students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the use of L1 in ESP classes in the monolingual classroom.

One of the objectives of this study is to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between L1 and English for Specific Purposes (ESP)?
- 2) Is L1 helping students mastering ESP lessons?
- 3) What are students' perceptions when using L1 in ESP classes?

From the early 1960's, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching. There hasn't been much and profound research concerning the role that a mother language plays in English for Specific Purposes classes. Using the mother tongue is by no means a theoretical approach to the use of the L1. On the contrary, it is specifically designed to offer practical ideas and become a helpful resource for the foreign language teacher. Deller & Rinvoluceri (2002) emphasizes the idea that the foreign language teacher should use the students' mother tongue only in certain situations, for example:

- comparing English grammar with the mother tongue's grammar can be very positive for some learners
- beginners will probably progress at a quicker pace if the use of the mother tongue is allowed in the classroom
- translation exercises may also be the perfect practice when there is a grammar point that is

causing trouble to students

Using or not using the mother tongue in second or foreign language acquisition deals mainly with the teaching methodology. In classes where teachers use L1 are referred to as using the traditional method or the grammar translation method, whereas classes where teachers do not use L1 are referred to those that use the direct method as a teaching methodology.

There has been very little research on what extend to use L1 in practice in the ESP classroom. In the other hand, finding out the perceptions of students, teachers and teacher educators on this subject is a fact that should not be neglected by those who conduct needs analysis. So, we will now turn briefly to research students' and teachers' perceptions when using L1 in SLA and ESP classes.

Literature Review

Among a number of teachers in second language acquisition, there seem to be an increasing conviction that the first language (L1) has a facilitating role in the second language acquisition (Schweer, C 1999). Also Ferrer, V (2000) states that a good number of teachers feel and based on their experiences as learners of a second language, that the mother tongue has an active and a beneficial role to play in instructed second language acquisition/learning. Among the first advocates of mother tongue use is David Atkinson (1987). He pointed out from his experience that mother tongue can be used mainly in accuracy-oriented tasks. Terence Doyle (1997), in his presentation at TESOL'97, reported that some L1 was used approximately 90% of the time in their classes. Some 65% of the students preferred the use of L1 in their classes. Noor, Hashim H (1994) in his research found out that the learner's L1 is very determining of second language acquisition. The L1 is a resource of knowledge which learners will use both positively and negatively to help them sift the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2. Schweers (1999) in a report of the outcomes of his research on the use of the mother tongue in English classes concludes that a second language can be learned through raising awareness to the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2.

Auerbach (1993) states that 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. Auerbach (1993) suggests the following possible uses of the mother tongue: negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson; record keeping; grammar, phonology, morphology, and spelling; discussion of cross-cultural issues; instructions or prompts; explanation of errors; and assessment of comprehension.

When teaching ESP through lexical items is the students' ability to find an equivalent in L1 to match a lexical phrase in L2. As all teachers of English probably realize proficiency in L2 implies the ability to be bilingual -- using appropriately and interchangeably L2 and L1. (Janulevičienė & Kavaliauskiene, 2000).

As ESP acquisition/learning and teaching usually start with mother tongue language, it is important to find out whether the developmental sequences of ESP as a first and second language are not different. It is also of importance to establish the sequences between the mother tongue and ESP.

Methodology

The research included 150 participants in this research: second-year students from law and Public administration faculties. The employed methods included administering self-assessment questionnaires and interviewing learners and teachers at the respective faculties.

The aim of this study was to examine whether using students L1 in acquiring a second language has a facilitating role. Showing also if it helps students feel more relaxed and comfortable when acquiring a foreign or second language. This feeling helps students to build up their confidentiality, and making them more secure during the process of language learning/acquisition. The teachers also filled out a short questionnaire about their attitudes toward the use of Albanian in the English classroom. The same questionnaire was also distributed to students.

Results

A high percentage of 75 of the student participants in this study felt that Albanian should be used in their English classes. Teachers in the other hand shared their views, more than half were against using L1 in their English classes. Approximately 7 percent of the students responded that they like their teachers to use only English in the classroom. Very obvious is the 82 percent of students who would like Albanian used to explain difficult concepts, but also about 65 percent of teachers considered this as a right use. Generally, students also responded notably higher than teachers on the following uses for Albanian: to help students feel more comfortable and confident, to check comprehension, and to define new vocabulary items. A notable percentage of students would like Albanian to be used in English classes either between 10 and 30 percent of the time. A large number of students like the use of Albanian because it helps them feel more comfortable and they feel less lost. About 67 percent of students feel Albanian can be used in translating the unknown words and difficult words. These results showed that in English classes in South East European University (SEEU) in Tetova, Albanian should be used in EFL/ESL and ESP classes to some degree. Students feel there are clear cases where Albanian will facilitate their comprehension of what is happening in class. A majority also agree that the use of Albanian helps them to learn English more easily.

Teacher responses

In this study, I also asked teachers to respond to the question "If you use Albanian in your classroom, why do you think this may be more effective than using English exclusively?"

Here are some of their responses:

- Some difficult concepts really need to be translated in students' mother tongue in order to help them follow up the activities.
- L1 Enables students to understand new professional concepts that are first created first in English and as such they need exclusive explanation in Albanian.
- Using of Albanian definitely helps the learner, since they become more capable of understanding the concepts and learn better all language skills.
- Sometimes it might be helpful to clarify very difficult concepts or vocabulary which is unfamiliar to students and the teachers cannot elicit their meaning from students, or when

they cannot guess their meaning from the context.

- Sometimes students need translation into their native language in order to understand better concepts that seem difficult for them.
- Students might feel less nervous in learning the difficult concepts in English language.
- In some cases, L1 helps to check understanding of very complex expressions, like idioms, phrases, etc. Therefore, I use L1 to clarify or check understanding in very complex language expressions.
- I believe that using Albanian in L1 classes helps lower level student when new vocabulary is introduced or when we teach them comparative grammar.
- Students understand better L2 if they base it upon L1.

Conclusion

I think that teachers have to take into consideration the teaching environment and the target population they teach. Some of them would say that in such classes using L2 as much as you can is very crucial, since students are only exposed to L2 only in classes; therefore they need more exposure to L2, because they do not practice their L2 outside classrooms. Others would also say that if you only use L2, you make your students try to communicate with you in that language, giving them the opportunity to practice the target language and drag out as much output in L2 as possible.

I, also, agree that English should be the primary means of communication in L2 classroom and that you should give students ample opportunities to process English receptively as well as to give them the opportunity to practice the target language and drag out as much output in L2 as possible even outside classrooms. My research also proves that a second language can be learned through comparison of similarities and differences between the L1 and the L2. Additionally, bringing Albanian into the English classes has made learning English appear to be less of tense and less lost students but students being more comfortable. This way, students will be more courageous and willing to learn English since their preferences are taken into consideration and are valued properly. The mother tongue represents a powerful resource that can be used in a number of ways to enhance learning but that it must always be used in a principled way. We have to see English as the language that should generally be used, and that whenever English is not being used there should be a good reason for this.

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