

The use of the native language in Georgian EFL classes

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Abstract

The issue of including or excluding the learners' native language in the EFL classroom has been the subject of ongoing discussion and controversy for a long time. This paper attempts to investigate the use of native Georgian language in English classes at two Georgian Universities. The main objectives were to examine the purpose of L1 use and the attitudes of Georgian students towards the role of their native language in the EFL classroom. The research was carried out in Georgia, Tbilisi. Participants were freshmen and sophomore students of the English language department. Data were collected through optional type questionnaires. The results revealed that there is a great need of L1 use in the classroom between students. It is proposed that teachers who want students to be fluent in a language and be successful in their future career, should satisfy their needs.

Keywords: classroom, grammar, instructions, native language, student, teacher, vocabulary, writing

Introduction

The issue of how to teach or learn a new language has generated an immense literature in English, based upon varying mixtures of assertion, theory, observation and experiment from a variety of perspectives. Since the late nineteenth century, the usual assumption in this literature has been that a new language is best taught and learned monolingually, without use of the students' own language for explanation, translation, testing, classroom management or general communication between teachers and students. The belief – sometimes explicit, but more often implicit – has been that everything that happens during a language class should be in the language being taught, and that students should not be encouraged or even banned from making any use of their native language(s). For much of the 20th century, the use of learners' native languages in language teaching and learning was banned by ELT theorists and methodologists. It was criticized for focusing exclusively on accuracy and writing at the expense of fluency and speaking, and for being authoritarian and dull. Consequently, Western European and North American methodologists promoted monolingual (Widdowson, 2003, pp.149-164) or interlingual teaching (Stern, 1992, pp. 279–299), based around the principle that only the target language should be used in the classroom.

Support for and acceptance of monolingual approaches that include such major current approaches as communicative language teaching, task-based learning and teaching, and content and language integrated learning, can be ascribed to a number of factors including: classes in which learners speak a variety of own languages, the employment of native-speaker English teachers who may not know the language(s) of their learners, and publishers' promotion of monolingual course books which could be used by native-speaker 'experts' and be marketed globally without variation. Furthermore, the perceived goals of language teaching changed from the so-called traditional or academic aim of developing learners' abilities to translate written texts and appreciate literature in the original to the goal of preparing learners to communicate in monolingual environments and emulate native speakers of the target language. It is worth noting, however, that for many learners, this goal was, and is, not necessarily useful, desirable or obtainable in a world in which learners need to operate bilingually or use English in a lingua franca environment with other non-native speakers of English language. In addition, an increasing amount of

communication is no longer face-to-face but via computer. Of course, what is fashionable in the literature does not necessarily reflect what happens in classrooms in all parts of the world.

The objective of a language teaching program is to develop in students a capability in a foreign language other than their own(L1).The students come to class proficient in at least one language and the task is to get them to acquire another one, to help them to become bilingual. So if bilingualism is our aim and as Spolsky (1998, p.49) holds, 'it is the prime example of language contact, for the two languages are in contact in the bilingual,' we should be busy getting the first language and the foreign language into contact in our learners (Widdowson, 2003, p.150). The foreignness of English means that the other language is implicated in some way in the process of achieving bilingual capability.

Language contact within an individual requires the languages to be compounded where the two languages fuse into a single system, and it is distinct from coordinate bilingualism where the two languages are kept apart as separate systems.

The policy of avoiding the first language assumes that the only valid form of L2 learning is coordination. But mostly the distinction between the two types has been watered down because of evidence that the two languages are very far from separate. All the evidence is that what the learners do is to go through a process of compound bilingualism through interlanguage stages. Even if the languages are distinct in theory, in practice they are interwoven in terms of phonology, vocabulary, syntax and processing. (Cook, 2001, p. 26). While teachers are busy trying to focus attention on the L2 as distinct from the L1, thereby striving to replicate conditions of coordinate bilingualism, the learners are busy on their own trying to bring the two languages together. As a result, L1 and L2 are impossible to be kept separate in students' minds.

Having been an EFL teacher for more than ten years, I feel that students prefer to use their native language, especially when explaining new structural patterns, in order to have full information about the correct use of the language, especially freshmen and sophomore students. Sometimes just one single word in their own language is a kind of remedy for them in the comprehension process. When the teacher explains something and students do not comprehend it without the help of their own language, students' interest levels fall. The study provides

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evidence to show that students prefer a certain amount of L1 to be used in the teaching and learning process.

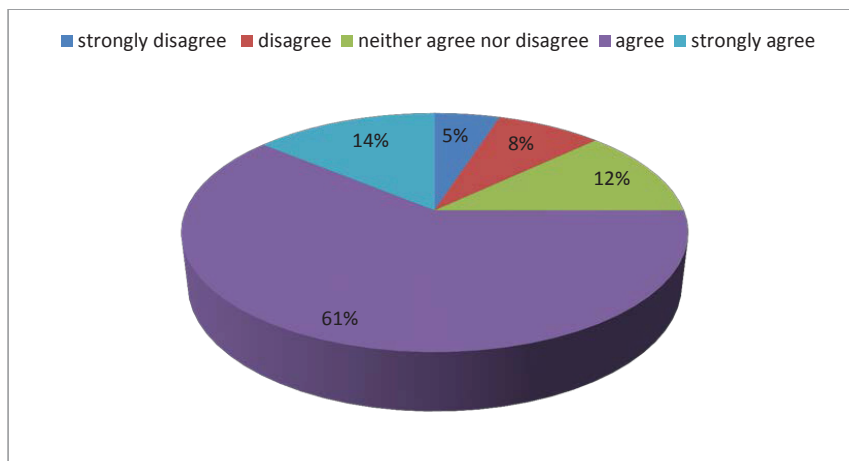
Methodology

To inquire students' attitudes towards native language usage in the classroom, an optional type of questionnaire was administered to 100 students of two different universities being freshmen and sophomores of the English Language Departments. The questionnaire was composed with the help of survey software package (www.surveymonkey.com). The survey was paper based and responses were entered manually. A total of 100 questionnaires were completed and returned. Questions 1 and 2 are in Likert-scale format, while other questions are in multiple choice format. Question 2 is, in fact, a variant of question 1, the difference is that question 1 offers to normally use L1, while question 2 – only when very necessary.

Results

Question 1: L1 should be used in the English classroom.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree



f.
 g. **Figure 1:** Students' opinions about using L1 in the teaching process

The results were as follows: the majority of the respondents 61% agreed with the given statement, while 14% strongly agreed. 8% disagreed, while 5% strongly disagreed with the statement. 12% had a neutral position.

Question 2: I would like my teacher to use L 1 in English classes when really necessary.

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree

Nearly 56% of the respondents agreed, while 18.4% strongly agreed with the given statement. 7.4% of the research subjects disagreed with the statement and 5.6% strongly disagreed. 13% of the respondents had neutral position.

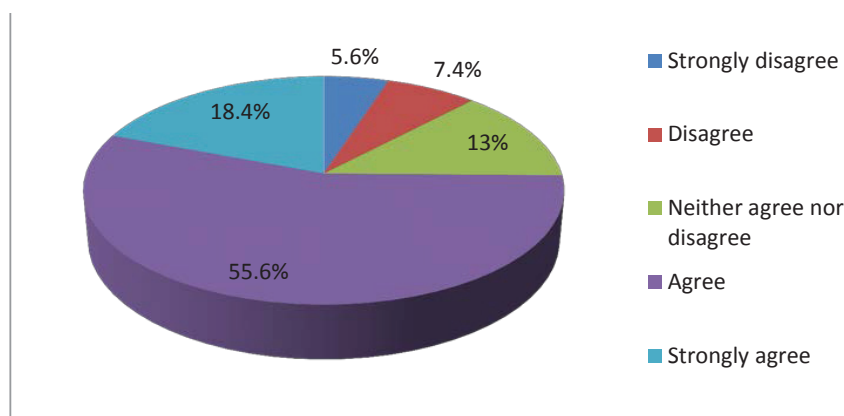


Figure 2: Learners' attitude towards using L1 by their teachers

Question 3: If yes, how often it should be used in the classroom?

- a) Sometimes
- b) Always
- c) Rarely
- d) Never

When asked respondents about the frequency of L1 usage in the language classes, 37% answered that they want it to be used sometimes, 31% preferred it to be used rarely, 5% of the students wanted L1 to be used always in the language classes, while 27% of the learners did not like this idea at all and they never want L1 to be used in the teaching process. Results showed that learners do want L1 to be used in the teaching/learning process.

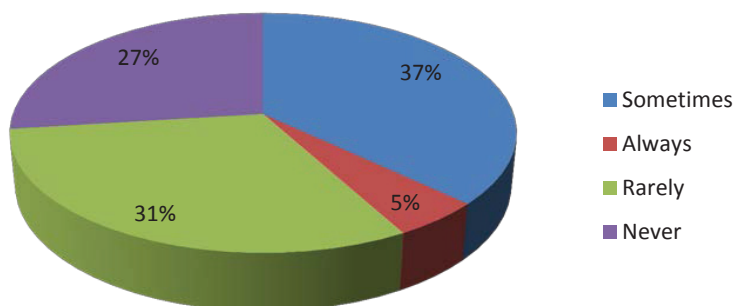


Figure 3: Students' opinions about the frequency of L1 used in the teaching process

Question 4: If you think the use of L1 is necessary in the classroom, why?

- a) It helps me to understand difficult grammar structures easily
- b) It helps me to understand new vocabulary better
- c) It helps me to understand academic writing structures better
- d) It makes me feel comfortable and less stressed

In the case of positive answers, respondents were asked to express their opinions about the necessity of L1 usage in the language classes. The majority of the respondents, 56.58%, answered that L1 is useful to understand difficult grammar structures easily, while 39.47% think that it helps them to understand new vocabulary better. For 26.32% L1 is helpful to understand academic writing structures better and 10.53% feel comfortable and less stressed when teachers use their native language. By having a wide vocabulary and a good command of grammar students can have better access to information and communicate with each other more easily and effectively. As we know without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Having a good command of grammar and rich vocabulary are equally important to acquire language successfully.

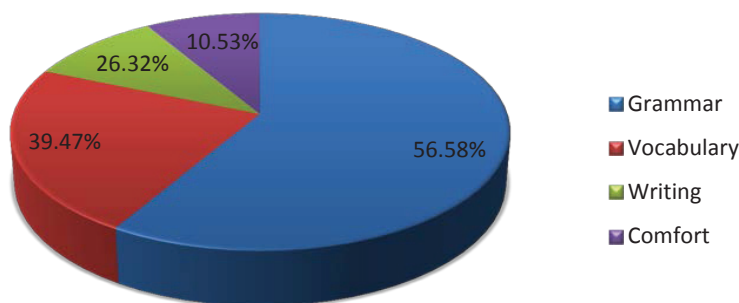


Figure 4: Students' opinions about the necessity of L1 in different skills

Question 5: When do you think it is helpful to use L1 in the English classroom?

- a) To explain complex grammar points
- b) To explain new vocabulary
- c) To explain academic writing techniques
- d) To practice the uses of some phrases and expressions
- e) To give instructions
- f) To give suggestions on how to learn more effectively

As the time of L1 use in the teaching process is very important, research subjects' opinions were really interesting. The survey showed that the majority of students, 38.16%, prefer L1 to be used in explaining complex grammar points; 34.21% - in explaining new vocabulary; 25% - in explaining academic writing techniques; 23.69% - in practicing the uses of phrases and expressions; 23.67% - in giving suggestions on how to learn more effectively and 13.16% - in giving instructions. As the data shows our students prefer the use of L1 in explanation stage more than in other stages.

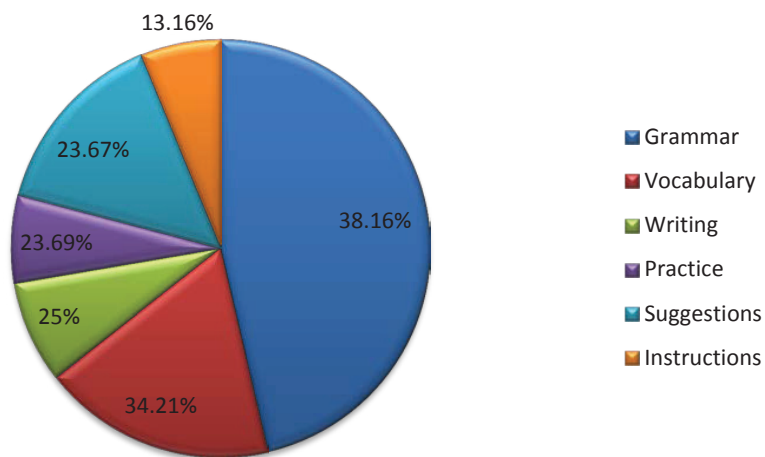


Figure 5: Students' opinions about the skills where L1 is helpful

Question 6: What percentage of time do you think L1 should be used in the class?

- a) 5%
- b) 10%
- c) 20%
- d) 30%
- e) Or more?

The results were as follows: 36.36% of the respondents thought that if 10% of the lesson was conducted in L1 it would be beneficial for them, while 20.78% considered that 20% should be done in their own language. Nearly one quarter of the students, 25%, felt that 5% of the lesson should be taught in their own language to facilitate the learning process. 12.99% considered 30% of the lesson conducted in L1, while for 10.39% the given time was not probably beneficial for them and they needed more time. However, they did not suggest their percentage. As the results show, students really need their own language to be used in the teaching and learning process and they supported their opinions in percentages as well.

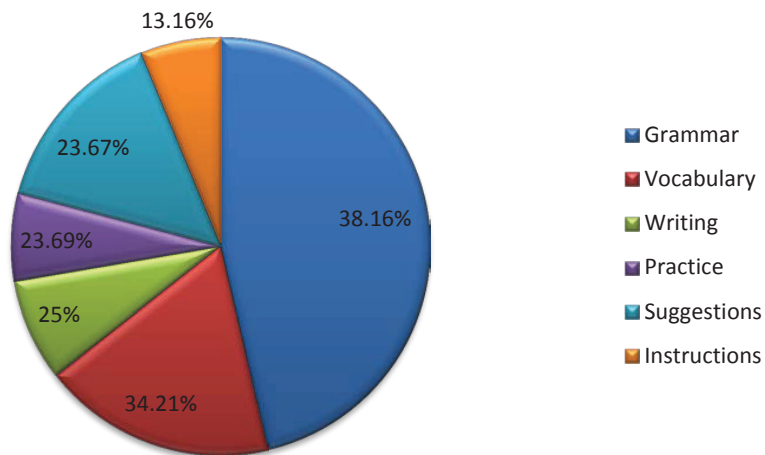


Figure 6: Students' opinions about the percentage of L1 used in the classroom

Conclusion

Using students' own language promotes learners autonomy, it motivates learners by letting them experience success. It can be used as a technique for raising consciousness at different linguistic and discourse levels, including grammar, lexis, rhetoric and genre.

Translation seems to be often used strategy and preferred language practice technique for many students in EFL settings. As such, it undoubtedly has place in the language classroom. The present paper has not meant to be a thorough coverage of the history or theories. I have only examined some major issues surrounding the field which were relevant as the main theoretical underpinnings for the task I set up to pursue here: the

assessment of students' opinions about their own language use in the language classes. After providing a brief overview of the origins and early concepts of the issue the arguments against translation in language teaching were addressed and the move towards revival was discussed. Finally, views of native language usage practice were appraised. My own attitude towards the issue was shown from the very introduction. I strongly believe that if classroom translation dresses in a modern garb, one that resembles real-life professional translation, giving students opportunities to exercise in situational analyses, resource research and exploitation, we will be benefiting professional translators themselves, for many of today's language students

will become tomorrow's clients. We will thus be promoting co-operation between the two groups to their mutual benefit. Students would thereby become aware of the situation of a professional translators with whom they would know how to cooperate for better translations, leading to better international communication between businesses and other bodies.

There is one essential point we cannot lose track of: the use of translation within an EFL classes is comparable to a medicine "which will have a beneficial effect only when properly administered and in the right dose." (Ivanova, 1998, p.105).

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