

Using Kurdish in Preparatory English Language Classrooms: A Replication Study at Tishk International University-Erbil, Iraq

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Abstract: Using mother tongue in foreign language classroom has been discussed over the years and still remains a contested issue among teachers and experts in the foreign languages field. This paper replicated a study conducted in Spain and later in China with the aim of determining whether Kurdish should be used in the Preparatory English Classrooms, and attitudes of students and teachers towards using Kurdish in the classroom. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used questionnaires for collecting quantitative data from instructors and students, and interviews together with classroom observation for qualitative data from 100 students and 20 teachers. The results indicate that even though majority of students do not wish Kurdish to be used in class, they still like it when teachers do. Teachers overwhelmingly support prudent use of Kurdish in the classrooms mostly while giving instructions and when dealing with new vocabulary terms, especially under time limit constraints. Reasons for students’ lack of support for their mother tongue in class were suggested and recommendations made.

Keywords: Preparatory English Classroom, Attitude, Mother Tongue, Instructions, Foreign Language

1. Introduction

The use of mother tongue (L1) in foreign languages (L2) classrooms has been somewhat controversial, with differing opinions from different schools of thought. Some like Paker & Karaağaç, (2015), for instance, maintains that mother tongue in EFL classrooms is inevitable, while others like Beisenbayeva, (2020) advocate for an increased L2 speaking environment, meaning that L1 should be minimized or perhaps eliminated entirely from L2 classes. In the middle are others like Wafula, (2020) with a compromising school of thought calling for a judicious code-switching approach that would allow sufficient L2 exposure without necessarily sidelining L1 use. Monolingual experts claim that students of foreign languages acquire the second language through the same way they did their mother tongue. This school of thought was particularly pushed by a strong monolingual proponent, Krashen, (1981) who argues

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that the use of mother tongue in foreign language classes should be limited or entirely eliminated. But the quagmire is, as Tang, (2002) ably puts it, a lot of EFL books and especially those on introduction to EFL do not fully address this important issue. And as Tang further posits, the plausible explanation is either the authors of the said books have not come across the issue of native language use in their classrooms, since most authors are English native speakers or mother tongue does not have an important role in the teaching of a foreign language. This school of thought inspired teaching of L2 primarily via L1, through grammar-translation methods and other linguistic forms (Ghobadi & Ghasemi, 2015).

However, in recent years, the shift to focus on spoken form of L2 through various approaches, including audiolingual methods and communicative approach effectively diminished the need and subliminally disheartened the use of L1 by emphasizing on an authentic L2 classroom environment (Shin, Dixon & Choi, 2020). Diminishing L1 usage in L2 classrooms has been argued to have detrimental psychological effects on learners because they consider such actions tantamount to dismissing their language as a second-class language. Therefore, ignoring L1 in L2 classrooms would later prove untenable, as Hall & Cook, (2012) discovered, experts in the field started again considering the use of L1 in language teaching in the early 90's and the trend has continued.

They asserted that the use of L1 is a realistic choice because it plays vital roles in various pedagogical discourses, as such, many authors now advocate for a bilingual approach in teaching L2 (Shin, et al., 2020). Some of the roles were identified earlier on by Auerbuch, (1993) as, among others; language analysis, classroom organization and management, giving instructions or prompts, presentation of grammar rules, discussion of cross-cultural matters, error explanations, and checking for comprehension.

The researchers in this paper, having gone through their education using English as an official second language strongly advocate prudent use of L1 in teaching L2. However, many L2 teachers feel uneasy to use L1 in their classrooms due to the accepted widespread notion that L1 should not be used even when there's a need for it. Therefore, the question still remains, should L1 be used in L2 classrooms. Two similar research that inspired us have been done elsewhere in different contexts. Schweers, (1999) in a Spanish context investigated EFL students' attitudes toward using L1 in the L2 classroom and found that both teachers and students agreed that Spanish language should be used in their classrooms. In the Chinese context, Tang, (2002) investigating the attitudes of first year English major students towards the use of Chinese in their classrooms found that students and teachers agreed that Chinese should be used, but mostly in a supportive role, especially in incidents where English fails. The researchers, based on the two studies, opted to replicate these studies in Kurdish context, with the main question being: Should Kurdish (L1) be used in Preparatory English Language (L2) classrooms?

2. Research Design

2.1 Questions

This study was premised on the following research questions:

1. Should Kurdish be used in Tishk International University Preparatory English Language (PEL) classrooms?
2. If so, how often should it be used and for what reasons?

3. What are the attitudes of the students and teachers toward using Kurdish in the PEL classroom?

2.2 Participants

Participants in this research were 100 PEL students randomly sampled from all PEL classes at Tishk International University - Erbil, Iraq. The sample also included 20 PEL teachers, from the same university. Some of them were highly experienced whereas others were beginners or with less experience.

2.3 Methods and Procedures

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods, utilizing questionnaires for both students and teachers, interviews and classroom observations for teachers.

2.4 Classroom Observations

Three reading and writing classes were observed, one with second grade students, then with third grade students, and lastly with fourth grade students. The three classes were taught by different teachers. The teachers and students were not informed of the intention of the observation so that the natural classroom environment would not be tampered with, guaranteeing authentic results.

2.5 Interviews

In the interviews, the three teachers whose classes were observed were asked one simple question: Why they use Kurdish in the classroom?

2.6 Questionnaires

Two questionnaires, one for teachers and another one for students were distributed. 100 students and 20 teachers returned completed questionnaires. The main purpose for the questionnaires was to determine the attitudes and opinions of using Kurdish in the English classrooms.

3. Results

The findings are presented based on the order in which data was collected and the instrument used.

3.1 The Questionnaire

As previously stated, a questionnaire was used to collect data from both students and teachers. 100 questionnaires were distributed to students and 100 of them returned fully and correctly answered, and all the 20 questionnaires given to teachers were answered and returned.

Table 1: Summary of the questionnaire findings for both sets of respondents

1. Should Kurdish be used in the classroom?				
Students	Yes 41.4%	No 57.6%		
Teachers	Yes 75.0%	No 25.0%		
2. Do you like your teacher to use Kurdish in class? (Students only)				
Not at all 15.2%		A little 29.3%		
Sometimes 48.5%		A lot 5.0%		
3. When do you think it's necessary to use Kurdish in the classroom?			Students	Teachers
a.	to explain complex grammar points		47.50%	65%
b.	to help define some new vocabulary points		24.20%	20%
c.	to explain difficult concepts or ideas		12.10%	20%
d.	to practice the use of some phrases and expressions		22.20%	45%
e.	to give instructions		8.10%	5%
f.	to give suggestions on how to learn effectively		10.10%	30%
4. If you think the use of Kurdish is necessary in the classroom, why?				
Students				
a.	It helps me to understand difficult concepts better		36%	
b.	It helps me to understand new vocabulary items better		39%	
c.	It makes me feel at ease, comfortable and less stressed		12%	
d.	I feel less lost		7%	
e.	Other, please specify _____		5%	
Teachers				
a.	It aids comprehension greatly		55%	
b.	It is more effective		64%	
c.	It is less time consuming		26%	
5. Do you think the use of Kurdish in the classroom helps you learn this language? (students)				
No 23%		A little 47%		
Fairly much 17%		A lot of 11%		
6. How often do you think Kurdish should be used in the classroom? (Students only)				
Never 7%		Very rarely 30%		
Sometimes 54%		Fairly frequently 3%		
7. What percentage of the time do you think Kurdish should be used in the classroom? (Students only)				
Frequency	Response	Frequency	Response	
5%	15%	50%	11%	
10%	19%	60%	4%	
20%	19%	70%	4%	
30%	19%	80%	0%	
40%	7%	90%	2%	

Note: the total percentage may be more than 100% where respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.

Table 2 shows clearly the disparity in thinking between teachers and students in terms of whether Kurdish should be used in the classroom or not. Majority of the teachers (75%) believe that Kurdish should be used in the classroom, an opinion agreed upon by only 41% of the students. This result is a departure from the previous two studies that found 100% teachers, 88.7% students (Schweers, 1999) and 72% teachers, 70% students (Tang, (2002) supported the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. However, more than 80% of the students actually like it when teachers use Kurdish in their classrooms, contradicting the prior result.

This result also demonstrates a clear gradual resistance of the use of L1 in L2 classrooms (Schweers, 1999; 0%), to very little acceptance (Tang, (2002: 3%), to the current research, 15%. Almost half of the student respondents think that it is mostly necessary for teachers to use Kurdish when explaining complex grammar points (47.50%) and also to help define some new vocabulary points (24.20%). Teachers on the other hand, think that it is most necessary for them to use Kurdish in class also when explaining complex grammar points (65%), when practicing the use of some phrases and expressions (45%), and when giving suggestions on how to learn effectively (30%). One teacher thinks it's necessary to use Kurdish when giving instructions. As of why they think it is necessary to use Kurdish in the classroom, 39% of the students said it helps them to understand new vocabulary items better, with almost the same number (36%) saying that it helps them to understand difficult concepts better.

A mere 7% explained that they feel less lost when their mother tongue is used in the classroom. The 5 students who chose the open-ended "other" insisted that Kurdish should not be used in the classroom, since this was not an option in the question. Almost three-quarters of the teachers on the other hand, felt it necessary to use Kurdish because it is effective. This could be in terms of classroom management. More than half of them said Kurdish aids comprehension greatly. Three-quarters of the students actually agreed that using Kurdish in the classroom helps them learn English, and more than half of them said that Kurdish should be used only 'sometimes', although 7 students said Kurdish should never be used in the English classroom and 3 of them agreed but said only 'fairly frequently.' when it came to the frequency of the use of Kurdish or the percentage of time that Kurdish should be allowed to be used in class, 72% of the students said between 5% and 30%. So, the questionnaire results actually justify the use of Kurdish in the English classrooms.

3.2 Classroom Observation

As stated previously, three teachers were observed for 50 minutes each and the results of the number of times each spoke in Kurdish in class recorded.

Table 2: Number of times teachers spoke Kurdish and reasons why they used it in class

Occasion Teacher	Occasions on which Kurdish was used				Total
	Giving instructions	Explaining meanings of words	Explaining complex ideas	Explaining complex grammar rules	
Teacher 1	4	9	2	1	16
Teacher 2	7	3	1	2	13
Teacher 3	1	2	0	1	4
Total	12	14	3	4	33

The table clearly shows that teachers used Kurdish mostly when explaining meanings of words (42%) and giving instructions (36%). In explaining meanings of words, one teacher used Kurdish on 9 different occasions within a 50-minute lesson. This was the overall highest number of times any teacher used Kurdish in the classes that were observed. While giving instructions, one teacher used L1 only ones, whereas another teacher used it 7 times. One possible reason for the difference could be the level of English in the different classes observed.

The university administers a placement test to all foundation course students, and students allocated classes based on the performance on that test. Other categories observed included explaining complex ideas and explaining complex grammar rules, of these categories registered the least use of Kurdish by teachers. Explaining complex ideas garnered less than 10%, with one teacher not having spoken Kurdish for this reason at all.

For explaining complex grammar rules, Kurdish was used about 12% of the total number of occasions that the language was used by all teachers, and in this category, two teachers each used only ones. Possible reason for the low number of occasions Kurdish was used in this category could be that students were good in grammar, and therefore teachers so no need to reinforce the explanation with L1. Among the teachers, the highest number of occasions Kurdish was used across the categories was almost 50%, with the least being 12%.

3.3 Interviews

The three teachers whose classes were observed were also interviewed to get a deeper insight because they occasionally use Kurdish in their classrooms. The reasons they gave varied across the board, ranging from classroom management to cognitive aspects. Part of the interviews are summarized below.

Teacher 1: "It is a lot easier to control the class when I speak in Kurdish to the students because there's a way certain words carry 'heavy' meaning or have a certain connotation, so students take them more seriously. These words or phrases may not have a direct translation in English, and even if they have, they may not carry the same weight as when spoken in Kurdish. Sometimes I like cracking jokes in class as icebreakers, and saying such things in English most times do not bring out the joke as intended, or if students misunderstand, they ruin the joke. The most important reason, however, is when students do not

understand a word or concept and I am running out of time to explain it over and over again. In such cases just one word or phrase Kurdish clears the air for everybody.”

Teacher 2: “I believe giving instructions is an important part of the teaching-learning process, and if students do not understand or misconstrue instructions, the whole lesson may as well have been lost. This is why when giving instructions I sometimes repeat in Kurdish, just to reinforce clarity of instructions. It helps to make my expectations clear to students. This makes the class easier to handle because each student understands what is expected of him/her.

Teacher 3: “The few times I speak Kurdish in class is when I am explaining meanings of words, especially complicated vocabularies that are not easy to explain using an example, in such cases directly translation works well for me and students. Otherwise, I use it to make announcements and give instructions to students.”

4. Discussion

This study bears similar characteristics to both Tang’s research in the Chinese context and Schweer’s findings in the Spanish context. The general consensus in all cases is that L1 should be allowed in L2 classrooms, and if applied judiciously, both pedagogical and affective benefits for teachers and students respectively, can be realized, besides the cognitive value associated with it. Indeed, it’s clear in all three cases that the mother tongue plays a peripheral role as a supportive and facilitative tool, which explains the suggested limited time allocation to its use, approximately about 10% of the total class time. This claim is also supported by teachers throughout the interviews. Some used it to ‘crack jokes’ whereas others used it to give instructions, a result also reported by Neokleous & Ofte, (2020), among other peripheral uses.

Despite the marginal involvement, L1 emerges as a powerful tool in the acquisition of L2, as evidenced by the overwhelming support of teachers from all the 3 contexts. A possible reason for the high number of teachers supporting the use of L1 in L2 classrooms could be that they are native speakers of L2. Initially when English started spreading across the world, it was being primarily taught by English native speakers. As such, English-only-classroom narrative suited the English native teacher who could not speak the local native language of the students. This narrative appears to change as more non-native English speakers join the English language teaching profession.

The other unambiguous similarity emerging across the contexts is the agreement by both teachers and students that whenever mother tongue was used, it was mostly either in dealing with complex grammar points or defining new vocabulary items. This is worth noting as it brings out a deep but often ignored role of L1, that when everything else fails or does not bring out the desired clarity, L1 automatically comes in as a last resort. The phrase “Everything else” is loosely used here in reference to other techniques teachers employ in class including body language, flash cards and other materials.

This study’s findings, however, are fundamentally different from the two previously discussed studies in one way. More than half of the students (57.6%) said they would not want Kurdish to be used in their classrooms, as opposed to 30% in Tang’s Chinese context and 11.3% in Schweer’s Spanish context. This is a significant result because it implies that most students are either advanced English users or are highly motivated to learn English and believe in monolingual school of thought. The latter carrying more weight

since respondents are English preparatory students. A viable explanation for this result could be the heavy presence of foreigners, especially American soldiers, United Nations employees, and refugees. The increasing number of expatriates in the region places more demand on the locals to learn a common medium, English, hence the motivation for the Preparatory students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research shows that Kurdish language can be beneficial to English preparatory students in their endeavor to learn a second language. It should, therefore, not be overlooked and instead be prudently applied in the PEL classes to enhance students, cognitive and affective development in English. A little-mentioned problem with grammatical explanation is whether the grammar should come from the L1 or the L2 cultures. The logic of avoiding the L1 would mean that only the grammar of L2 grammarians is appropriate, creating additional problems when the grammatical traditions are different, say between English and Kurdish. Howatt (1984, p.289) suggested that 'if there is another "language teaching revolution" round the corner, it will have to assemble a convincing set of arguments to support some alternative (bilingual?) principle of equal power'.

This article has suggested ways of introducing the L1 into the classroom to produce students who are able to operate with two language systems, as genuine L2 users, not imitation natives. Bringing the L1 back from exile may lead not only to the improvement of existing teaching methods but also to innovations in methodology. In particular it may liberate the task-based learning approach so that it can foster the students' natural collaborative efforts in the classroom through their L1 as well as their L2. While this paper has tried to deal with the L1 issue on its own, the discussion forms part of a wider approach to language teaching that is emerging, based on the uniqueness of the L2 user.

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