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Advantages and Disadvantages of
the Teacher’s Use of the Students’ First
Language in a Basic English Course at CIEX
“Ignacio Manuel Altamirano”

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Abstract
The study is focused on the analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of using the first language (Spanish) in an English class. The study also explored the contributions of the students’ L1 in the teaching and learning processes. The context was the Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros (CIEX). The participants were an EFL teacher and his five students in a Basic English course. A qualitative research approach was used with the implementation of interview guides to both the teacher and the students as well as a class observation format. It is important to mention that the following paper focuses only on the design of a BA in English letters thesis.

Resumen
Este estudio está enfocado en el análisis de las ventajas y desventajas del uso de la lengua materna de los estudiantes (Español) por parte del profesor de inglés. Además, el estudio explora las contribuciones de la primera lengua en los procesos de enseñanza – aprendizaje. El contexto fue el Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros CIEX y los participantes fueron un profesor de inglés y 5 estudiantes de un curso básico. El enfoque de la investigación fue cualitativo y los instrumentos fueron una guía de entrevista para el profesor, una guía de entrevista para los estudiantes y un formato de observación de un curso de Inglés básico. Es importante mencionar que el siguiente documento se enfoca solamente en el diseño de una tesis para obtener el grado de Licenciatura en Letras Inglesas.

Key words: L1 use, EFL classroom, didactic tool, pedagogical processes, practice.

Introduction
The role of the use of the first language in a second or foreign language (L2 or FL) class has been under debate for a long time. Some researchers such as Halliwell and Jones (1991) claim that using the L2 as a normal means of communication is possible in order to achieve success, they argue that the target language has to be the predominant language in the classroom while others believe that the role of the first language (L1) is vital in an L2 class because it contributes to the students’ progress in the target language (TL) (Storch, Wigglesworth, 2003, Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks, & Donato (1994). According to Nation (1997), in classes where students share the same language, teachers can take advantage of students’ L1 and use a variety of strategies to encourage students to use both the L1 and L2 in learning the L2. On the other hand, Steven Krashen’s Natural Approach (1995) on language acquisition states that students learn an L2 through massive exposure to the target language in the classroom, which is similar to how they learned their mother tongue.

The use of the students’ L1 in the L2 classroom has been a topic of debate in the last two decades. Some studies have suggested that the occasional use of L1 can yield positive results for L2 learning (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Wells, 1999).
The use of two languages at the same time is called code-switching. Some English educators argue that code-switching is not considered wrong or defective by the teachers or students when it is used in the classroom. Moreover, this may be used as a strategy employed by the teachers and pupils in the teaching and learning of a second or foreign language. Sometimes code-switching is used by teachers; it seems to be used during teaching when they introduce a new unit or when the educator tries to explain something about grammar. This code-switching is applied as a strategy by educators.


This paper presents the design of a Bachelor of Arts thesis, which was carried out in a private foreign language center in Southern Mexico. This thesis is particularly focused on the advantages and disadvantages of the use of the students’ L1 in Basic English courses. In the next sections, an overview of the topic will be presented, followed by the research problem and main research questions. Afterwards, the subsidiary research questions and specific research objectives will be discussed. The next section will present the justification of the study and conclude with limitations of the research.

Background Information

There is great number of essential issues in the field of language teaching. One of the major issues in learning and teaching English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) is whether or not to use the first language (L1), or mother tongue (MT). Several studies have been conducted, some of which support while others oppose the use of L1 in an EFL classroom. The general assumption that has prevailed for some time is that English should be learned through English instruction only and not by the use of the students’ L1. Because of this belief, some educators even prohibit the use of L1 in the classroom. Furthermore, many English language teaching professionals argue that students will not truly appreciate the target language (TL) exchanges if they are continually relying on their L1 (Bouangeune, 2009).

Most second language and foreign language educators agree that students need to be exposed to input in the TL if they are expected to learn (Krashen, 1995). On the other hand, according to Cook (2001), using considerable amount of the TL may be critical; he believes that the L1 deserves an important place in the TL classroom. In EFL classrooms, however, it does not matter what language is being taught, students and teachers continue to use their L1 to communicate with each other. Many researchers as well as teachers have started to re-evaluate the role of teachers’ and students’ use of L1 in the EFL classroom.

The statement of the problem is the following: A situation has drawn many teachers’ attention in a private language school named Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros “Ignacio Manuel Altamirano” (CIEX) in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico. The students’ L1 (Spanish) is constantly used in English courses in order to communicate ideas or simply to perform a task. In informal conversations, some teachers at CIEX mentioned that they did not use their L1 at all when they studied English at school. They believed that being exposed to the second language (L2) demanded a lot of attention from them. Moreover, they use the students’ mother tongue (Spanish) in some key stages of the courses and lessons to help the students accomplish pedagogical tasks and communicate ideas.

As the literature review revealed, some researchers argue that the use of L1 is not appropriate when English is being taught, and students are explicitly told not to use their L1. However, the use of L1 should not be considered as a problem or an obstacle for the learning process. It happens naturally since students do not have the TL vocabulary, structures, and/or strategies necessary to be able to communicate in the TL.

As can be seen, there are opposite views about the use of L1 in a L2 classroom. Some researchers believe that the use of the L1 benefits target language learning while others argue that L1 should not be used or over-used in a L2 classroom.
Given the opposing views in language acquisition literature and the importance of language choices in L2 classrooms for L2 learning, it is necessary to conduct an empirical study to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the teacher’s use of the students’ L1 in L2 classrooms. It is an aspiration of this research to further raise awareness of this debate.

**Research Questions**

The main research question of the study is the following:
Are there any advantages and/or disadvantages in the use of the students’ first language by the teacher in Basic English classes at Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros “Ignacio Manuel Altamirano” (CIEX)?

The subsidiary research questions below provided with some elements to answer the main research question:

» What contributions does the use of the students’ L1 by the teacher have in the Basic English course?
» What are the advantages of the use of Spanish as a first language by the students in Basic English course?
» What are the disadvantages of the use of Spanish as a first language by the students in English basic course?

The main research objective is to analyze the advantages and/or disadvantages in the use of the students’ first language by the teacher in the Basic English course at CIEX.

The specific research objectives presented below are related to the subsidiary research questions:

» To analyze the contributions of the use of Spanish from the teacher and students to the English learning process.
» To identify advantages and/or disadvantages in the use of Spanish as a first language by the students in Basic English course at CIEX.
» To identify disadvantages in the use of Spanish as a first language by the students in Basic English course at CIEX.

The justification for this research relies on the importance of further ESL/EFL teaching and learning development. Results from the study will have direct implications for language choices in EFL classrooms. Specifically, the study will analyze not only the advantages and/or disadvantages of teacher’s use of the students’ L1 in EFL classrooms, but also the frequency and appropriateness of the use of the L1. In addition, this study will analyze the contributions of L1 to the learning and teaching processes of English as a foreign language.

The results of this research will be important for EFL students since it will look at EFL students’ perspectives and attitudes toward using their L1 in their English language classrooms. Furthermore, this research will help students and educators have a better understanding and explanation of their attitudes towards their L1 and towards the foreign language. Finally, this research offers some ideas to help language teachers improve their teaching practices in EFL classrooms.

The limitations of the study are several. First, the study will only focus on the role of L1 use in the EFL classroom, but will not examine other factors that may influence L2/EFL learning outcomes. Also, this study will be carried out in Basic English classes in a private language school, and it is thus limited in the generalizability of the results. Finally, this study will only include one teacher and five students’ perceptions in a single EFL class. The small sample size also raises questions about the spread of the results to EFL learning and teaching.

**Conclusion**

This paper focuses on presenting the design of the study and the aim is to state the main research question about the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in an EFL class. The subsidiary research questions were constructed to contribute to answer the main research question. The main research objective was developed based on the existing literature and the main research question. Next, the specific objectives were linked to the subsidiary research questions since they became the tasks of the study. The justification is stated in terms of the importance of the research and the limitations are expressed in relation to the scope of the study. Finally, it is important to mention that in this article only the thesis design is developed.
The literature review and the research methods will be published in future papers.

References:


