Chinese Learners' L1 Use in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Programme

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Abstract

This article reports on a classroom-based study that explored the functions of first language (L1) use in second language classroom discourse, particularly in pair and group discussions. Students' and teachers' perceptions of L1 use were also examined. Six Chinese students from an intact English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme in New Zealand took part in this study. Their interaction in class was audio-recorded for two hours per week for eighteen weeks. Stimulated recall interviews were conducted with them once every month to gauge their perceptions of L1 use. The teachers were also interviewed about the students' participation in class and their L1 use. The results show that the students have negative views of L1 use in L2 classroom interactions while the teachers seemed to have mixed attitudes towards it. The functions identified for the use of L1 include maintaining flow of the communication, clarification of meaning, use of metalinguistic knowledge, and facilitation of deliberation of vocabulary and grammar. The findings suggest that due to the positive role that L1 use can play in L2 development, students should not be prohibited the use of L1 in L2 classes.

Keywords: First language (L1) use, classroom interaction, English for Academic Purposes, translanguaging, EAP

Introduction

In the past, behaviourist learning proponents viewed the use of first language (L1) in the second language (L2) process as predominantly negative. According to this once dominant view in the second language acquisition (SLA) field, old habits and patterns of the L1 can interfere with the learning process of the L2 (differences between the two languages can lead to negative transfer of the L1 (Ellis, 1985, 2008).

However, as a result of the rejection of behaviourism (in regards to language learning), researchers holding a minimalist view claim that learners of L2 can/should acquire a second/foreign language the same way as children acquire their L1. Thus, the influence of the L1 is of little importance in L2 learning (Dulay & Burt, 1972) and both maximizing L2 input and avoiding use of L1 are seen as essential in L2 classrooms. In this line of research, Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis highlights the importance of teachers providing sufficient comprehensible input in their L2 classrooms for learners to accumulate sufficient competence in L2 (and overcome the problem of any potential L1 interference). That implied that the L2 could be acquired independently from the L1.

Although the importance of comprehensible input has been widely acknowledged, Swain's (1985) output hypothesis points out that comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for successful language learning; instead, comprehensible output is also a key factor in L2 development; that is, learners should make attempts to use L2 when they make grammatical choices, test hypotheses, and stretch their interlanguage system. Later, Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis suggested that interaction in L2 is also essential for successful language learning. In meaningful L2 interactions, learners internalise their L2 input and use opportunities to interact with their interlocutors and negotiate meaning. All these hypotheses have highlighted the importance of providing L2 input and opportunities for pushed output in meaningful L2 interactions.

L1 Use from Socio-cultural Perspective

More recently, however, the sociocultural theory of language learning has provided a different view of language learning. Central to this theory is the role of collaborative interaction in learning. Language learning is seen as a mediated process in collaborative interactions between students and between teachers and students (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Studies informed by sociocultural theory have examined the role of L1 and the functions it serves in collaborative interaction in L2 learning. Empirical research conducted in both EFL and ESL contexts in the last decade have revealed positive functions of L1 use in L2 interactions.

For example, Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) examined pair interaction of 54 EFL students in an essay revision task and found that the use of L1 enabled the

students to complete the task more effectively (i.e., they gained a clearer understanding of the text and offered suggestions on the improvement of the text). They also used the L1 to maintain the flow of the dialogue and externalise their thoughts. Similarly, Anton and DiCamilla's (1998) study on five pairs of L1 English learners of Spanish engaging in a writing task revealed similar use of L1. In particular, the use of L1 served a number of functions including providing each other with assistance, maintaining relationships, and vocalising their thoughts.

Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) investigated the use of L1 by Indonesian and Chinese learners of English in task interaction and found that the students mostly used L1 for task management, clarification of meaning, and searching for vocabulary. Interviews with the students revealed a negative attitude towards L1 use; that is, they felt reluctant to use L1 in L2 discussions but they thought it was nevertheless helpful. More recently, Storch and Aldosari (2010) examined the effect of learner proficiency pairing and task type on L1 use in EFL pair work in an Arabic context. The findings show that the use of L1 was moderate and students mainly used their native language for task management and to facilitate deliberations of vocabulary. Use of the L1 provided learners with the opportunity to gain a joint understanding of task requirements. When the L1 was used for deliberation of vocabulary, it helped interlocutors receive timely assistance about clarifying word meaning and word searches. Storch and Aldosari's study confirmed findings from previous research by Swain and Lapkin (2000) that learners use the L1 in pair work sparingly.

In the current globalised era where English is seen as a pluricentric language, there is a growing understanding of the practice of code-switching or code-mixing as a normal strategy that is practiced by all multilingual speakers. This practice is often referred to as translanguaging, which is viewed as a discourse practice centred on the natural, observable communicative practices of bilinguals and multilinguals (Garcia, 2009a, 2009b). From this point of view, languages are used as tools by bilingual and multilingual users to make meaning and maximize communicative potential. That means, a fundamental feature of translanguaging is that this practice occurs naturally as "individuals use the communicative potential of all languages at their disposal as they attempt to make meaning" of their daily experiences (Garrity, Aquino-Sterling & Day, 2015, p. 178).

From this point of view, the goal of modern language education is not only to produce proficient users of an L2 or L3, but strategic and resourceful bilingual and

multilingual users who are capable of utilising all of their linguistic resources and abilities in meaningful interactions and to make sense of their bi/multi-lingual worlds (Pennycook, 2014). Therefore, given the growing interest in the use of L1 in L2 learning, the positive results of L1 use from a handful of recent studies, and a large number of studies on translanguaging practice of bilingual and multilingual users of English, it appears that further research in L1 use with different learners in various contexts is still needed. Thus the current study aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are students' and teachers' perceptions of first language use in English classroom interactions?
2. What functions do the first language serve in the learners' interaction in pairs and groups?

Method

Context and Participants

This study, part of a one-year longitudinal classroom-based research project, was conducted at a university-based language school in Auckland, New Zealand. The participants were enrolled in a Foundation Certificate in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme. The prerequisite for them to be accepted in this programme was a conditional offer of a place in a tertiary institution in New Zealand for study in either an undergraduate or postgraduate programme. To meet the English requirements as stated on their conditional offers and successfully pass the course, the students needed to achieve different course grades, such as an A grade for entry into master's degrees, a B grade for postgraduate diplomas and some undergraduate degrees, and a C grade for most undergraduate degrees. The EAP programme was intended to prepare students for academic studies in English and equip them with the necessary skills to succeed in their further studies in the academic context. The programme included developing skills in note-taking and presentation, communication techniques, writing academic reports and essays, and preparing for examinations.

Six Chinese students from an intact EAP class volunteered to participate in this study. The length of time the participants had lived in New Zealand ranged from 1 month to over a year. All of them had been learning English as a foreign language in their home country for over 7 years. They rated their overall profi-

ciency in English as average or above. Most of them had taken the IELTS test prior to studying in the EAP programme, with their results ranging from 5.0 to 7.0. They were identified by the programme as being at the advanced proficiency level. Three teachers were also involved in this study. They all had a postgraduate degree in Applied Linguistics with teaching experience ranging from 10 to 15 years.

Data Collection

The main source of data was collected by audio recording the classes for half a year. The class was observed and recorded 2 hours per week for 18 weeks in total. Stimulated-recall interviews were carried out with each student once per month. The interview questions were related to their feelings about their participation in class. Specific questions were asked about L1 use if they happened to have used Chinese in that class observed (Appendix 1). Each interview lasted from forty minutes to one hour. The teachers were interviewed about their class and students' participation (Appendix 2). Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Data Coding and Analysis

The classroom data used in this study consisted of recorded and transcribed pair work and group work from each observed class. Any turns including students' use of Chinese were highlighted. To code the functions of L1 use in the class interaction data, Storch and Aldosari's (2010) framework was used as a starting point. The functions of L1 use in their study were identified as task management, discussing and generating ideas, grammar deliberations, vocabulary deliberations, and mechanics deliberations. Any new functions that emerged in this study were also added to the list.

The interviews with students and teachers were transcribed and content analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Any mention of L1 use in the data was noted and coded as students' and teachers' perceptions of the L1 use.

Results and Discussion

Throughout the data collection period, I observed numerous occasions when some of the students communicated in their L1, especially in group discussions. They knew they were not encouraged to use L1 and they did not feel positive about use of L1 in class. This is similar to previous studies (Storch & Aldosari, 2010;

Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) which found that the learners were aware that they should avoid using L1 in L2 classes. They mentioned that they would not normally speak to another student in Chinese unless this interlocutor initiated the talk in Chinese. They felt obliged to respond in Chinese rather than English because it would feel unnatural for them to respond in a different language to an initiation in Chinese. Similarly, Peng (2008) reported that some participants in her study on Chinese students' communication behaviour in an EFL Chinese classroom also felt obliged to respond in their L1 to the group mate who initiated the talk in L1.

A number of functions of L1 use in class interactions were identified. Some students chose to ask for clarification from peers using an L1 in order to resolve comprehension difficulties,

> If something I don't know for example I didn't pay attention to
> teacher's speaking, and I misunderstand something yeah I ask I ask
> classmates in Chinese, yeah because… I know it's quite bad but but it's
> Chinese can help me to understand it completely. (Student Y)

When they lacked the vocabulary in English, they would switch back to L1 as a scaffold to communicating in English. As Student M noted,

> We most use Chinese to communicate the key word…I try to use Eng-
> lish but when we're get involved with it's not I can't it's not er I can't
> think of English words, so I use Chinese.

It was thought that translating key words into L1 "helps other to understand the whole meaning whole sentence meaning" (Student C). But some students thought otherwise; for example, Student W disliked that her classmate explained the word in Chinese to her when they could have used English:

> If you speak to people who can speak Chinese, and even when you
> speak English, but you want to ask the word they want to use Chinese
> to respond you, just tell you what is the word meaning. I think it's not
> good, you can explain it in English.

Some of the students chose to switch back to L1 in discussion on account of it being less demanding to communicate in L1 with peers,

> Actually if I discuss with Chinese, maybe I will speak Chinese, that's
> easy more relaxed than English…sometimes I feel lazy I want to relax,

we use Chinese you can say it without thinking, in English you must
think first say it. (Student C)

When there was an increase in task difficulty, there was the possibility of code-
switching:

"the task the teacher give us the difficulty of task is increasing…we use
more Chinese" (Student M).

They used L1 for socialising and chatting in class as well. When the chat concerned
something more personal, it felt more natural to use L1:

Someone might think it's strange to talk with them in English especially
we're discussing some something like your hair or your dress, because
it's too complicated to talk in English and very strange. (Student A)

Similar to students' perceptions of their L1 use, the teachers' perceptions of stu-
dents' L1 use were also not uniform. Some teachers disapproved of L1 use for tak-
ing a timeout from tasks. They exercised strict rules towards L1 use in class, such
as stopping the students from talking in L1 and separating the two students who
conversed in L1. As reported by the students,

In the morning class, [Teacher's name] usually forbid us to speak Chi-
nese, our own languages, just English in class, John didn't mention
about this too much. (Student C)

Teacher will hear and she will stop us to talk in Chinese and she will
separate the two people who like to talk Chinese…when we speak use
Chinese she will stop us. (Student W)

The fact that they sometimes took time out was also noticed by Teacher H, "They
participate well but are not easy to keep on task sometimes. They tend to chat a
lot. In afternoon class at least they are not prepared to put in a lot of effort". Cer-
tainly Teacher J's attitude towards use of L1 in class was not positive: "I think it's
a waste of their money, I don't agree with that as a learning choice, er I think it's
foolish, and I think they know that." But he chose to deal with this problem in var-
ious ways, some of which were more tolerant of L1 use for more appropriate pur-
poses, such as giving explanation to aid comprehension:

Depend[ing] on what they're explaining, it'll be better if they try to do
it in English, but if the idea is to structure a task or something then if
they understand in their own language, it won't help much.

The teachers also identified different occasions when the students used their L1, including asking for clarification, getting excited about the discussion, or having to talk about something more personal:

> I guess my default assumption is that they do it, because they can communicate quite well in English I think, they do it just when they get too excited, or they want to I don't know talk about something really personal, or something about it, OK fair enough, but I count that as a break when it's part of their learning strategy and works well for them, once or twice I heard a discussion which seemed to be clarification, only once or twice. (Teacher John)

Freiermuth and Jarrel (2006) also found that some students reverted to their L1 to compensate for their weakness in their spoken L2. In situations where silence was identified as uncomfortable for teachers and students, it was convenient and stress-relieving for students to opt for their L1. It seems to be natural for the students to opt to their L1 when they all speak the same L1 (Duff, 2001; Kobayashi, 2003). The students in the current study used their L1 in both off-task chatting and on-task planning.

In comparing the students' report of L1 use in the interviews with their actual L1 use in classroom discourse, I found that some students did take timeout at times to chat with one another in L1, which, as suggested by Freiermuth and Jarrel, would impede their communication in L2. However, there were also occasions when use of L1 played a role not only in keeping the students on task, but also in aiding comprehension in an efficient and effective manner. I exemplify the positive role that reliance on L1 plays in this type of situation in the following three excerpts from classroom discourse.

In Example 1, Student C and A started off the interaction in L2 but then switched to L1 to discuss the meanings of the words "involve" and "export." Student C initiated use of L1 in this episode to give definitions of these two words. This is an example of vocabulary deliberation. It can be argued that use of L1 in this situation assisted comprehension and thus aided the flow of communication.

Example 1
1. C: Try involve. (…) zen me pin ya (How do you spell?)
2. A: Involve can I check, involve not evolve, in ((looks it up in dictionary))

3. C: involved, juan ru shen me xian ru lian lei ((gives several definitions of "in-volve"))

4. A: Well have you got example, have you got example, li ju (example)

5. C: XX get involved jiu shi shi ren juan ru shen me dang zhong (It means get sb. involved in), get involved in.

6. A: XX

7. C: Juan ru shen me shen me bao kuo (get involved in sth. means) include, juan ru jiu shi (get involved means) get involved, be involved.

8. A: ni gei wo xuan ge dong dong ci hao ma, gei wo xuan ge li ju (Could you choose a verb for me, choose an example for me)

9. A: Export, zhe shen me yi si (What does this mean?)

10. C: Chu kou (export) export.

In Example 2, Student C opted for L1 to give definitions of the words "analyse" and "consistence." He also used L1 metalinguistic terms for gerund and noun forms. This is an example of the grammar deliberation function. Like the preceding examples, use of L1 was entangled with use of L2. But it was clear that both of the students were on task and engaged in pair discussion.

Example 2

1. C: Analyse shi zhi fen xi de ma (means analyse) dong ming ci (gerund)

2. A: Is XX ((reads out the sentence))

    (…)

3. A: Cons, did you use this one?

4. C: Which one?

5. A: Er consist, consist. Consis-tence

6. C: This one consistence, consistence, ming ci shi (the noun form is) consistency

7. A: That's right.

8. C: Um consistence. Bu dui, gen consistence de yi si bu yi yang (It's not right. It has a different meaning from consistence). yi si shi zhu cheng de yi si (It means consists of.)

In Example 3, Student A was not certain if the use of 'involve' was correct in her sentence. She proposed use of present perfect tense in line 3. Student C pointed out directly that she should use the passive voice in the subsequent turn. Student A then suggested using the preposition from to collocate with "involve" in line 5. Student C corrected her misuse of from by suggesting "in" in line 6. To make the

rule more explicit, he explained it again in L1. Student A seemed to be suspicious of his correction of the preposition in and she was attempting to ask for clarification from the teacher.

Example 3

1. A: I'm not sure if it's right. Involve.
2. C: Involve the big trouble. You are.
3. A: I have involved
4. C: No no no, be involved. I have been.
5. A: Invovle from
6. C: Involve, not from, be involved in sth. ni bei juan ru shen me shi qing (You're involved in something). (…) A big financial pro (…) °° procedure or °°
7. A: °° Financial, be involved°°
8. C: For for months
9. A: Ask T2
10. C: In, involve of financial, involve from the financial

It can be seen from the three examples above that learners' communication in English interacted with the L1 use in class participation. Use of L1 seemed to play a positive role, maintaining their engagement with the tasks. Overall, the functions of L1 use that emerged in this study seem to resonate with the functions of task management, maintenance of group relationship, vocabulary deliberation, and grammar deliberation (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of this study show that L1 use emerged naturally in L2 classrooms. Although students in general did not feel positive about their L1 use, the teachers in this study seemed to have mixed attitudes towards it. A closer examination of the functions of L1 use in the classroom discourse reveals that the students do switch to L1 within and between sentences for the purpose of maintaining flow of the communication, clarification of meaning, use of metalinguistic knowledge and facilitation of deliberation of vocabulary and grammar.

As stated before, the use of L1 is being seen in a much more positive light these days. The results of this study do provide further empirical evidence for positive

functions of L1 use in L2 task interaction and classroom interaction. As Storch and Aldosari (2010) have recommended, use of L1 by learners serves "important cognitive, social and pedagogical functions" and they should therefore not be restricted or prohibited the use of L1 in L2 classes as they might be denied "the opportunity of using an important tool" (p. 372). It can be concluded that the strategic use of L1 by both teachers and students can be a useful resource in the L2 classroom and this current study supports this notion. Future research should continue to examine L1 use as it occurs naturally in language classrooms, particularly in EFL contexts.

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About the Author

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Appendix 1

Stimulated-recall Interview for Students

Instructions:

What we are going to do now is to listen to the recordings from the class. I am interested in what you were thinking at the time you were talking. What I would like you to do is tell me what you were thinking, what was on your mind at the time.

You can pause the recorder any time you want. If you want to tell me something about what you were thinking, you can push pause. If I have a question, I'll push pause and ask you to talk about that part of the recording.

Stimulated-recall questions:
1. What were you thinking right then/at this point?
2. I notice that you used Chinese to talk to your classmate in the pair/group work. Can you tell me what you were saying? Why you were using Chinese?
3. Can you remember what you were thinking when s/he used Chinese to talk to you?
4. Can you tell me what you thought when she replied to your question in Chinese?

Appendix 2

Interview for Teachers

1. Could you describe the goals and content of the course you're currently teaching?
2. What's your general impression on the students' participation in class?
3. Have you noticed that some of the students used Chinese in their discussion in pairs or groups?
4. How do you feel about their use of Chinese in class?
5. What do you think they sometimes use the Chinese for?
6. Do you allow them to use Chinese in the pair/group discussion? Why /why not?