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Teacher Talk in English Classroom: L1 or L2

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Abstract

Maximum use of English (L2) or L2-only approach in English classrooms is generally suggested since it is believed to help students with exposure to the language. However, in a context where teachers share the native language: Thai (L1) with students, code switching between L1 and L2 in teacher talk seems to be a common practice. Even if it is common, only little knowledge on Thai English teachers' choice of L1 and L2 in class has been discussed. Therefore, this research study aims to explore the area. To do so, English classroom discourse was divided into 16 main situations. For each situation, English teachers were asked to rate the amount of their L1 and L2 used on a seven-point rating scale together with their detailed justifications. The findings illustrate that code switching between L1 and L2 in class is unavoidable. Unfortunately, a common pattern of teachers' code switching cannot be concluded. In other words, the amounts of L1 and L2 use in class by different teachers varied. Teachers' beliefs, experiences, and awareness of students' understanding of the lessons are the major factors influencing the teachers' language choice. The curriculum requirement for English-medium class was not at all considered a factor. Thus, we may see that the maximum or L2-only policy set by the school is rather idealistic. Results from this study, hopefully, may

ring a wake-up call for course or material developers to reconsider the provision of L2 exposure.

Keywords: Classroom Language, L1, L2, Thai English Teacher, Teacher Talk.

1. Introduction

With the influential notion of the communicative approaches in English language teaching (ELT) in the past decades, English teachers, no matter native or non-native speakers, are generally encouraged to use as much English (L2) as possible in their class (Franklin, 1990; Willis, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Atkinson, 1993; Butzkamm, 2000). The use of L2-only might be beneficial if we consider language exposure vital to students' learning. However, if we consider some other aspects such as classroom efficiency, students' preference, and humanism (Harbord, 1992); the use of L1 can contribute a number of advantages (Medgyes, 1994; Watson Todd, 1997; Levine, 2011; Ma, 2012).

Since the use of both L1 and L2 are useful in English classrooms, code-switching between the two can be assumed as a common practice for non-native teachers who speak the same L1 as students. In an informal discussion with Thai English teachers at KMUTT, where all English courses are strongly advised to apply English-medium instruction, it is found that the use of L1 in class is seemingly unavoidable. All teachers have different preferences and justifications for their use of L1 and L2. However, no one knows if the way they switch between the languages systematic and their reasons conform. Given that teachers' code-switching between L1 and L2 is a very common practice, it seems to be a neglected area of study. To gain a better understanding of Thai English teachers' use of L1 and L2 in English classrooms, this study aims to investigate if there is a common pattern of the two language use, and the reasons and factors affecting the teachers' language choice.

L1 and L2 in Classroom Situations

Maximum use of L2 or L2 only in language classroom is generally considered one of the key factors for students to achieve the target language. L2 communication in language classrooms is important for its own sake. Not only can L2 use in class provide students' exposure to the real use of the target language, but it can also create a classroom atmosphere in which students are encouraged to practice the language (Liu, Ahn, Baek, & Han, 2004; Crawford, 2004; Atkinson, 1993). Based on these major advantages of L2 use in the teaching of L2, L2 (especially English) teachers are encouraged to use as much L2 as possible in their classroom teaching.

Although the advantages of using L2 are inarguable, the complete avoidance of L1 seems impractical for non-native teachers in some classroom situations. Several studies conclude that non-native teachers can profit from L1 in some conditions. The studies of Macaro (2000), Levine (2003), Liu et al. (2004) and Crawford (2004) suggest that L1 can be used to assist L2 teaching when the lessons or contexts relevant to language functions and forms, such as grammar and vocabulary, and some complex ideas and important information. Liu et al. (2004) conclude that when teachers' concerns are about time saving, background knowledge preparation, classroom management or only having a small talk with students, L1 might then be more suitable. Furthermore, the use of L1 is also recommended so as to build rapport or familiarity between teachers and students, explain complex instructions, and confirm students' comprehension (Atkinson, 1993; Macaro, 2000).

It is obviously seen that L1 and L2 have their own roles in the language classrooms. However, what teachers and students think about the use of the two languages is also an interesting issue. The studies of Liu et al. (2004) and Macaro (2000, 2001) on teachers'

attitudes on the use of L1 share some significant findings. Their findings demonstrate that most of the teachers thought of the use of L1 in language classroom as an unwilling choice. Although L1 was regularly used as a last resort in some necessary cases, still it was perceived unacceptable for them. Also, the idea that the teachers try to maximize their L2 use is because they believe students would expect them to do so (Liu et al., 2004).

As for students' attitudes, it is found that students generally consider the use of L1 by teachers as a means to facilitate understanding of complex of L2 concepts. Furthermore, by using L1, students find it easier to communicate with their teachers (Liu et al., 2004; Ma, 2012).

Use of L1 and L2 in a language classroom

Many research studies have investigated the amount of L1 and L2 used in the classroom situations where teachers are non-native and share the native languages with students. However, suggestions on the exact amount between the use of L1 and L2 have never been reported.

According to the study of Liu et al. (2004), from the survey report, the expected amount of the use of L2 was around 58% and 53% was suggested by Korean teachers and students respectively. However, the information from classroom observation (VDO recordings), demonstrated the use of L2 was found ranging from 10-90%, with an average of 60%; meaning that the amount of L1 and L2 used by Korean teachers varied greatly.

Apart from the suggested amount in the Korean context, the investigation in language classes of many different foreign languages in USA also supported the use of L2 rather than L1 (Levine, 2003). From the study, the amount of the use of L2 expected by both teachers and students were varied from 60-100%. Even though it is clear that the expected amount of L2 use is higher than that of L1, the exact proportion still cannot be confirmed.

Similarly to the study in USA, the study in teaching English to Spanish speakers also indicates the need of the large amount of L2 use in classrooms (Schweers, 2003). Although teachers and learners agreed on the use of L1 in class as it could support L2 teaching, they reported that the amount of L1 use should be limited to 10-39% only.

2. Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study included Thai teachers teaching English to Thai students at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). All the subjects were qualified English teachers working full time at the university. All of them hold at least a Master's degree in the field of TESL, TEFL, TESOL, Applied Linguistics or a closely related field. They have advanced language proficiency and the expertise to use classroom English and thus they are able to use English full-time in class, if they prefer.

To collect data, the questionnaire was distributed to all English teachers in the department (24 teachers). However, only fourteen of them returned the questionnaires. The fourteen subjects were mixed with age and gender. Their teaching experiences varied from one to more than ten years. There were a variety of courses that the subjects taught. However, the courses can be classified into two categories: language knowledge-based courses and communication-based courses.

Instruments

To acquire information on the proportion of non-native English teachers' use of L1 and L2 in common classroom situations as well as the influential factors that could affect the non-native English teachers' decisions for code switching between L1 and L2, a questionnaire was used as the main instrument of this study.

The questionnaire consists of two main sections namely personal information and proportion of L1 and L2 use in classroom. For the first sections, the subjects were asked to provide necessary information including their courses taught, teaching experiences, and language experiences in native speaking countries. Information in this section should be considered as important external factors influencing the teachers' language choice.

Next, the second section of the questionnaire contains sixteen items demonstrating sixteen common situations in a language classroom. The sixteen situations were developed from several studies of classroom discourse (Sinclair & Brazil, 1982; Gower, Phillips, & Walters, 2005; Watson Todd, Chaiyasuk, & Tantisawetrat, 2008). For each of the situation, a seven-point rating scale, ranging from Thai only to English only, was provided for the subject to rate their proportions of L1 and L2 use. Apart from the rating scale, the subjects were also asked to state their reasons.

Data Analysis

The data from the questionnaire, both personal information and responses for L1 and L2 use, were tallied. The ratings of the sixteen main classroom situations from all subjects were averaged. The mean scores of all items were then interpreted based on the following interpretation scheme presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Mean scores interpretation scheme*

Mean score	Meanings
1.00-2.00	Use Thai only (T)
2.01-2.80	Use Thai much more than English (T >> E)
2.81-3.60	Use Thai more than English (T > E)
3.61-4.40	Use Thai equally to English (T = E)
4.41-5.20	Use English more than Thai (E > T)
5.21-6.00	Use English much more than Thai. (E >> T)
6.01-7.00	Use English only (E)

After the interpretation of the mean scores, the subjects' reasons provided for each of the items were considered in order to gain further explanations.

3. Results

Amount of L1 and L2 use in English classrooms

Table 2 illustrates the overall findings from the ratings of the sixteen situations by the fourteen subject teachers. The mean scores of all sixteen situations show that the proportions of the use of L1 and L2 generally lean towards the use of L2 more than L1. None of the situations possesses the mean score showing that the teachers used more L1 than L2. In addition, there are five situations (31% of all classroom situations) that the use of L1 increases to be equal to the use of L2: situation 4, 9, 11, 12 and 14. When considering the nature of the situations, it is found that all of them are not related to the main teaching of the lessons. Moreover, when looking at the reasons given by the subject teachers, it can be concluded that the increase of L1 use is due to more concerns of the teachers for the students' understanding of what the teachers said. Even though the contents of the talk in these situations are not related to the subject content, the subject teachers perceived them very important for students to clearly understand especially when the teachers aimed at obtaining students' attention and disciplining the students.

Next, there are five situations showing that teachers prefer to use L2 a bit more than L1: situations 1, 3, 8, 15, and 16 (31% of all classroom situations). For these situations, except situation 1, the talk is more related to students' learning than those situations in which L1 is used equally to L2. However, the main reason that the teachers include the talk in L1 in quite a reasonable amount is still concerning students' understanding. That is the teachers mentioned that they wanted to make sure that the students understood what they said. It is interesting to note that even if the teachers tried to use L2, when the content of the talk might cause some learning difficulty and/or might affect students' learning outcome, the teachers intentionally increased the use of L1 instead of trying to simplify L2 talk.

When talking about topics related to the main lesson contents and when the teachers thought that the topics were not difficult for students to understand, the mean scores from the ratings show that the teachers prefer to use L2 much more than L1: situations 2, 6, 7, 10, and 13. Furthermore, when the content was short and easy, and the teachers were certain that students had no problem understanding the talk at all, they maximized their L2 use, and avoided using L1 completely. Additionally, the teachers' justifications for maximizing L2 use in these situations reflect the teachers' beliefs. The teachers attempted to use maximum L2 or only L2 in class because they did believe that it might help students with language exposure. Students could have real experiences at least in listening and understanding English speaking.

Table 2: Overall findings of the sixteen classroom situations

Situation	Subject teachers														Mean score
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	T11	T12	T13	T14	
1 Warm-up or general talk Unrelated to lesson content	7	4	6	2	4	7	6	6	6	7	7	7	1	2	5.14
2 Review of previous lesson that students clearly understood	7	3	7	6	6	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	3	4	5.93
3 Review of previous lesson that students might not understood well	6	3	7	5	5	7	6	6	2	7	6	6	3	3	5.14
4 Review of previous lesson that students did not understood	5	3	6	3	3	7	5	5	2	7	4	4	2	2	4.14
5 Teach lesson content which is easy and short	7	5	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	3	6	6.43
6 Teach lesson content which is easy but lengthy	7	5	7	6	6	7	7	6	7	7	6	4	3	6	6.00
7 Teach lesson content which is difficult but short	6	3	7	5	6	7	7	6	6	7	6	4	2	4	5.43
8 Teach lesson content which is difficult and lengthy	5	2	6	4	3	7	7	6	4	7	6	3	2	2	4.57
9 Seek students' attention by talking about things unrelated to content (Jokes, stories etc.)	3	*	6	2	2	7	7	7	2	7	*	5	1	1	4.17
10 Give instructions for class activity	7	5	6	6	6	7	7	6	7	7	6	4	3	2	5.64
11 Discipline and control students' behaviour	6	4	4	1	1	7	4	7	1	7	*	6	2	1	3.92
12 Give feedback	7	5	4	2	4	7	7	5	*	7	3	6	1	1	4.21
13 Wrap up the lesson which students understood	6	4	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	2	2	5.71
14 Wrap up the lesson which students does not seem to understand	3	3	6	1	6	7	5	5	2	7	5	1	2	1	3.86
15 Assign and explain homework	6	4	6	4	6	7	6	6	*	7	5	4	3	2	5.08
16 Give assignment, explain how to do and how to evaluate	6	3	5	4	6	7	6	6	*	7	4	7	2	2	5.00
Mean score	5.88	3.73	6.00	4.00	4.81	7.00	6.31	6.13	4.54	7.00	5.43	5.13	2.19	2.56	

* means the subject did not respond to the item

Factors affecting teachers' choice of L1 and L2

Next, when looking at each of the subject teachers individually, it can be said that most of the teachers prefer to use L2 more than L1 in all situations. However, there are two teachers (T2 and T4) whose the mean scores indicate that in average they use L1 in the similar amount to L2. Interestingly, there are two teachers (T13 and T14) reporting that they generally use L1 more than L2.

In order to explain the phenomenon, the teachers' personal information (namely the nature of the courses taught, teaching experience, and language experience in native speaking countries) was taken into consideration. The findings indicate that the nature of the courses taught has only slight effects on the subjects' choices between L1 and L2 use. At KMUTT, the English courses can be separated into main types; namely, language-based courses (teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and the four basic skills) and communication-based courses (teaching mostly oral communication skills). It is rather common that in communication courses, the teachers tend to use more L2 than L1. Nevertheless, by considering the information of each of the subject teachers, it is found that no matter what types of courses they were teaching, the general patterns of L1 and L2 use conform. That is even though in teaching the language-based courses, the subject teachers might integrate more L1 in their talk; the amount of L2 use was still reported to be higher than the use of L1.

Teachers' experience indicates a strong relationship with teachers' use of L1 and L2. First, the teachers with advanced teaching experience (teaching for more than ten years) reported notably higher use of L2 than do teachers with less teaching experience (teaching for one to five years). Then, when looking at language experience of the teachers in that whether they have spent time in any native speaking countries, it is found that this factor had a strong impact on the less-experienced teachers. Meanwhile, it has no relationship at all for the more experienced teachers. The subject teachers who had less teaching experience but who had been abroad seemed not to have any objection to the use of L2. Meanwhile, if the teachers had little teaching experience and had never been abroad (T13 and T14), they preferred the use of L1 over L2. In contrast, language experience does not seem to be a factor for more experienced teachers to use L1 and L2. As mentioned above, all experienced teachers reported a greater amount of L2 use in class, no matter if they had been to any native speaking countries or not.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has discussed the amount of L1 and L2 use in English classes based on the teachers' responses to a set of questionnaire. The findings present that most of the teachers normally use L2 more than L1 in all classroom situations. The teachers maximize their L2 use because they believed that it could help with students' learning. Even though the L2-medium instruction is required by the school's policy, none of the teachers mentioned it. More than that, some teachers were not aware of it since they reported the high use of L1. Thus, it can be understood that the L2-only policy does not play an important role for teachers' language choice.

This brings up a point that is worth discussing. If the institute demands English teachers predominantly use English in their teaching, only setting the policy might not guarantee a successful outcome. In fact, the notion of the teaching approach, such as the communicative one, should be explicitly explained to the teachers. Teachers should be extensively informed about the needs and importance of the L2 use requirement.

Apart from teachers' agreement to the policy, material and course developers should be aware of the presentation of the subject contents. Since the findings show that teachers always have great concerns regarding students' understanding and make it the major priority (and this is what a good teacher should be like), to design the course and material to enhance

the maximum use of L2, the contents should be made simple. Scaffolding techniques, like sequencing the lessons and taking difficult content into bits and so on, might be taken into account (Applebee 1986; Brush & Saye, 2002).

In consideration of external factors, it is found that the individual experience of the teachers is more influential in the language choice of the teachers than the nature of the English courses. Teachers with greater teaching experience prefer maximum use of L2. Meanwhile, for teachers with less teaching experience, their preferences varied. If they have more language experience from spending time in an L2 speaking country, they prefer the use of L2 over or at least equally to L1. On the contrary, those who do not have such language experience hesitate to use L2. With this finding, it appears that if the institute aims to encourage teachers to place a priority on using the L2 in teaching, they should pay more attention to less-experienced teachers. Teacher training schemes need to be set.

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