Students' First Language in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classroom in Ubon Ratchathani University "The students' perspective"

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Abstract
This study tries to investigate the students' perspective on the use of their L1 (Thai) in the acquisition of the L2 (English) in Ubon Ratchathani University. The study adapts questions used in previous studies to capture whether students think Thai should be used in the English classroom and in what situations students use their L1 in English class. Convenience sampling method was applied. An online questionnaire was created and distributed through social media and the REG system of the university. 75 respondents took the survey.

Going by the finding 100% of students believe that Thai should be used in the classroom. This is consistent with (WILLIAMS, 1999) whose finding revealed that 88.7% of students and 100% of teachers believed that the L1 should be used in the L2 classroom in the University of Puerto Rico. It is also consistent with other studies (e.g., Kovacic&Kirinic, 2011; Sharma, 2006) who concluded students would prefer having their first languages used a Little in the English classrooms. The situations in which students use and will prefer the teachers to use their L1 in the L2 classroom are consistent with those outlined by (Cook, Using the first language in the classroom, 2001). Therefore, students in Ubon Ratchathani University will find it difficult to adapt to an all-English classroom. In other to avoid or limit such difficulties, students L1 should be systematically used as a classroom resource (Cook, 2001). Failure to do so may create a negative learning environment resulting in ineffective learning outcomes.

Keywords: First-Language (L1), Second-Language (L2), Language learners

Introduction

As Thailand strives to become proficient in the use of English language, the country's educational sector has resorted to hiring foreign professionals to train their students in The English language. These teachers have different backgrounds and, therefore, apply different teaching methods in the classroom. Using the first language (L1) as a means to facilitate the learning of English, (L2) remains an area that has brought substantial debate amongst educators and students alike. While some still argue that an English-only classroom policy creates the best environment for students to learn the L2 (Chaudron, 1988), others argue that such environment considers L2 learners as part of a group they can never belong to (Cook, 1997) he sees this as Monolingual bias. A situation where L2 learners are taught and evaluated in the same standards as if they were studying their L1. Irrespective of which stand one takes, students' first language (L1) most clearly influence not only their acquisition but also their use of any second language (L2).

However, there is still a lot of controversies as to whether it is appropriate for students to use their first language in other to facilitate their acquisition of a second language. Though there exist a lot of objections to an English-only approach in the field of English Language teaching (ELT), most researchers and teachers alike still see English as the most appropriate language that should be exclusively used in the teaching and learning of ESL or EFL (e.g., Auerbach, 1993; Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002). Though a number of schools in Thailand have begun to apply the English-only teaching approach in their ESL classrooms, a majority of the schools still prefer to employ teachers who understand the Thai language as a means of facilitating the teaching-learning process. This paper explores students' opinions and habits in the English classroom. Ideally, English should be the only language used in the ESL classroom, however, it will be important for practitioners and researchers alike to have a students' perspective on the use of their L2 in the acquisition of the L1 (Al Sharaeai, 2012)

Research objectives

The main objective of this study is to find out reasons why students in Ubon Ratchathani University (UBU) use their first language in the English classroom. This paper will try to answer the following questions:
- For what reasons do Thai students in UBU use Thai in their English classroom?
- How often do they use Thai in the English classroom?
- What do students think about the use of Thai by their English teachers in the teaching of English?

Literature review

As the debate of which approach is better, an English all classroom or an incorporation of the first language in the teaching of English continue to grow, many researchers and practitioners are taking sites and providing argument either in support for or against the use of the first language in the teaching and learning of English. In support of the English-only classroom Chaudron (1988) argue that in the acquisition of any second language, the teaching, and learning environment should provide the

maximum use of the language not just for instruction and drilling but also for class management and discipline. Similarly, a group of other researchers also suggest that exclusive English only inputs in the classroom provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the acquisition of English as a second or foreign language (Krashen, 1981, 2003; Krashen & Teller 1983; Duff & Polio 1990).

On the other hand (Cook, Using the first language in the classroom, 2001) in his article presents a number of arguments in support for the use of the first language in second language acquisition. To start with, Crook argues that language learners differ in the way they learn and some develop a unique way to make connections and analyze language use. To this effect, the techniques they use is different from that use in the acquisitions of their first language. One of this technique is inevitably the use of their first language. He also argues that though teachers try to stamp out the use of students' first language in the class by using drawings, photographs, and flashcards to helps students make meaning without using their first language, learners will always make connections between vocabulary, syntax, and phonology of their first and second language in their own minds. Based on this, Crook suggest that instead of trying to completely stop the use of the first language in second language classrooms, teachers could use the first language as a positive way to improve students learning and understanding of the second language. In his conclusion, he pointed out a number of ways in which the first language could be positively used in the English classroom this included;
- Explaining and checking the meaning.
- Explaining and teaching grammar,
- Class management,
- Explaining class task and activities,
- Maintaining contacts with students.

These suggestions were consistent with earlier finding by Charlene Polio and Patricia Duff (1994) who had a similar suggestion with the addition of using the first language to build rapport between teachers and students.

The use of English only though seen as an approach that can be justified on pedagogical grounds, is however inconsistent with existing research findings which show that this practice is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound as there is enough evidence to suggest that students' L1 if used as a linguistic resource can be beneficial at all levels of ESL. (Auerbach, 1993).

This is consistent with (Atkinson, 1987) who points out that, students translate newly thought language items into their native language as a means to reinforce the structure and find the difference between the native and target language. He argues that though this activity is not communicative, it is directed at improving the accuracy of newly learned target language structure.

Furthermore, (Giroux, 2001; Hartman, 2003) presented an argument that the English-only policy in English classrooms was first introduced in the United States, not because of the effect it had or could have on the acquisition of English as a second language but as a means to minimize the threat posed by the increasing number of non-English speaking immigrants coming from outside. Both minority and majority linguist groups in the US felt threaten by each other. Thus, an English-only classroom was seen as a way to minimize this threat.

Most teaching methods since the 1880s have adopted this Direct Method avoidance of the L1. However it is only in circumstances where the teacher does not speak the students' L1 and the students have different L1s that this could be achieved. (Cook, Using the first language in the classroom, 2001). According to (Tamara Lucas, 1994) 'the use of the native language is so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumptions mitigate against it. Yet the avoidance of L1 in the L2 classroom is so much so that some teachers feel that by admitting to the use of L1 in their classroom is an admission of professional misconduct (Mitchell, 1988).

The desire to avoid L1 as a teaching resource may lead one to question why there is continues advocacy for its avoidance despite existing empirical evidence of its benefits as a classroom resource. The most convincing argument lies in the fact that learners of L1 do not have another language to help them acquire the L1 therefore teaching should be based on the characteristic of the acquisition of the L1 as, for example just as children acquire their L1 (Asher, 1986) as argued by (Cook,1997) in his article, "Monolingual bias in second language acquisition", trying to impose this idea will be treating L2 learners as part of a group they can never belong to. To him Whether L2 learners are successful or not has to be measured against the standards of L2 users not those of native speakers and so L1 'success' in becoming native speakers is different from L2 'success' in becoming L2 users.

Methodology

The research was design as an online survey with questions selected from the review of the literature as used by other researchers in this area of study. This study tries to capture UBU students' perspective on the use of their mother tough in the English language classroom.

The sample for this study constituted students studying in UBU. The questionnaire was distributed online using social media and the REG system of the university and student were encourage to answer on a voluntary basis. Convenience sampling method was applied so as to ensure the reliability of the results obtained.

The data is collected using questionnaires structured in three different sections. Section one covers demographic (gender, program of study, year of study and age). Section two starts with the questions should Thai be used in the English glass room? And also covers the situations in which students use their L1 in class with six questions, while section three covers the degree to which students prefer the teacher to use the L1 in the English class with 10 questions

Results

The findings of this study can be summarized as follows.

Respondent profile.

Of the 75 students who took the survey, 45 were students in the International business management program representing 60% of the total sample size. 9.3% of the students were from the Accounting program, 8%, of the respondents, were from General Management, Hotel Management and Backing and Finance respectively. The rest of the respondents were made up of 4% from Marketing and 2.7 % from the English and Communication Program. This shows an uneven distribution of the respondents profile which was mainly because the fact that the questionnaires were in English and could not be understood by a majority of the students. Also taking the questionnaire was voluntary on convenient bases. As far as the study year is concern, 36% were first-year students while 32%, 25.3%, and 6.7% were from the third, second and final year respectively.

Should Thai be used in the English classroom?

The first question asked students if they think their first language (Thai) should be used in teaching their second language (English). All the 75 respondent to the survey answered yes. This is consistent with (WILLIAMS, 1999) whose finding revealed that 88.7% of students and 100% of teachers believed that the L2 should be used in the L1 classroom in the University of Puerto Rico. It is also consistent with other studies (e.g., Kovacic & Kirinic, 2011; Sharma, 2006) who concluded students would prefer having their first languages used a Little in the English classrooms. This results, therefore, indicates that the question should not be if or not to use Thai in the English classroom in Ubon Ratchathani but how it should and can be used. Instructors at the university must, therefore, take this students' view into consideration when designing their lesson in order to ensure a comfortable learning environment for their students.

Reliability of the scale used.

In order to examine the reliability of the scale dimensions used, the Chronbach's Alpha which is considered as the most widely acceptable reliability measure was calculated. Table 1 provides the Chronbach's Alpha (α) of the two dimensions. As there is no value below 0.7 it can be concluded that the measures used here are consistent enough for the study.

Table 1.

Dimension	item	Cronbach's Alpha
Frequency of the first language used in English classes	1. I speak my 1st language in class when I want to chat with my classmates about topics that are not connected to class.	.78
	2. I speak my 1st language in class when I need to ask my classmate to explain a point in the lesson for me.	
	3. I speak my 1st language in class when I can't think of the correct word in English when talking to my classmates.	
	4. I speak my 1st language in class when my classmate starts talking to me in my 1st language while we are working on a task.	
	5. I speak my 1st language in class when I talk about personal things with my classmate.	
	6. I speak my 1st language with other members of my group in an English class because we want to finish the group activity faster.	
opinion in the use of 1st language in class	7. In English class, it is best to have a teacher who can understand my 1st language.	.73
	8. I would prefer to sit next to a classmate who speaks my 1st language in English class	
	9. I think English class should have an English-only policy (only English is allowed in the English classroom)	
	10. As my English improves, I become more comfortable speaking only English in English class.	
	11. I want to be able to speak my 1st language In English class when I feel I need to.	
	12. It's important to speak only English in class as long as I am completing the course task.	
	13. Using dictionaries and resources in the 1st language should be allowed in English class.	
	14. Speaking my first language with my classmates during and between class activities should be okay as long as the course is not a speaking course.	
	15. Speaking my 1st language in English class helps me understand the lesson better.	
	16. I feel uncomfortable if I can't use my 1st language in an English class.	

The frequency of using the first language in English class.

As the result shows on table 1.1, students usually speak their first language in class in all the situations mention in the survey however worthy of note is the fact that the highest mean score of 3.00 is linked to item four suggesting that the greatest trigger of the first language in the English class is actually being spoken to in the first language by another student. One can, therefore, imply that if students are spoken to by their peers only in English while in class, it will go a long way to reducing the amount of the first language used in and English classroom.

Table 1. 1 Frequency of using the first language in English class. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I speak my 1st language in class when I want to chat with my classmates about topics that are not connected to class.	75	2.80	.885
I speak my 1st language in class when I need to ask my classmate to explain a point in the lesson for me.	75	2.97	.805
I speak my 1st language in class when I can't think of the correct word in English when talking to my classmates.	75	2.85	.911
I speak my 1st language in class when my classmate starts talking to me in my 1st language while we are working on a task.	75	3.00	.885
I speak my 1st language in class when I talk about personal things with my classmate.	75	2.80	.915
I speak my 1st language with other members of my group in an English class because we want to finish the group activity faster.	75	2.85	.996
Valid N (listwise)	75		

Opinion in the use of 1st language in class

When asked about their opinion as to how the first language should be used in the English classroom, the result as seen in table 1.2 below suggest that students agree that it is important for their first language not to be used in a number of situations in class. To start with, a mean score of 4.03 for Item 11 suggest that students will prefer an English-only policy to be applied in class gradually as their English improves. What is more is that item 12 has a mean score of 4.08 indicating the fact that students will prefer not to use their first language any time an English task is being done in class. Students were, however, indifferent to item 16 this, therefore, suggest that using the first language or not using it will not affect students comfort in an English classroom. The results equally suggest that students will prefer to have a teacher who has some knowledge of their first language rather than a teacher who has no knowledge of their first language at all. It is also important to note that the item with the least mean score is item 16. Indicating that in will not greatly affect students comfort if they don't use their first language in class.

Table 1.2 Opinion in the use of 1st language in class
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
In English class, it is best to have a teacher who can understand my 1st language.	75	3.53	1.298
I would prefer to sit next to a classmate who speaks my 1st language in English class	75	3.01	1.168
I want to be able to speak my 1st language In English class when I feel I need to	75	3.09	1.153
I think English class should have an English-only policy (only English is allowed in the English classroom)	75	3.64	1.204
As my English improves, I become more comfortable speaking only English in English class.	75	4.03	.986
It's important to speak only English in class as long as I am completing the course task.	75	4.08	.941
Using dictionaries and resources in the 1st language should be allowed in English class.	75	3.72	.994
Speaking my first language with my classmates during and between class activities should be okay as long as the course is not a speaking course.	75	3.29	1.024
Speaking my 1st language in English class helps me understand the lesson better.	75	3.65	1.072
I feel uncomfortable if I can't use my 1st language in an English class.	75	2.93	1.212
Valid N (listwise)	75		

The frequency of using the first language in English class. According to the study program.

In trying to see if different results could emerge if the students were grouped following their program of study, the following results were obtained. Isolated cases of International Business students were analyzed. The result shows that though they all use their first language in the English class, the frequency of use is much lower with no mean score of 3 or above. Interestingly enough the highest mean score of 2.96 is associated with item 1 suggesting that the international business management students mostly use their first language in class for things that are not connected to the lesson being taught.

In contrast to this, students from the accounting program will always use their first language in class in situations that are related to the lesson being taught and will hardly use it when talking to their friend on topics that are not related to the lesion. No other significant difference occurred when data from other programs was isolated and studied independently.

Applying the same method using study year as the independent variable, the study discovered that students turn to use more of their first language in class as their study year increases. This is a country to the general results which suggest that students will prefer to use less of their first language as their level of English improves. One would have expected that students in the 4th year should use less of their first language in all of the situations but a look at table 1.3 suggest the contrary. However this may not be a complete representation as the number of sampled students is unevenly distributed across years of study with 27, 19, 24 and 5 in ascending order from 1st to 4th year respectively.

Table 1.3 Frequency of using the first language in English class by year of study				
Item	1st year mean	2nd year mean	3rd year mean	4th year mean
I speak my 1st language in class when I want to chat with my classmates about topics that are not connected to class.	2.70	2.63	3.00	3.00
I speak my 1st language in class when I need to ask my classmate to explain a point in the lesson for me.	2.67	3.16	3.12	3.20
I speak my 1st language in class when I can't think of the correct word in English when talking to my classmates.	2.48	3.32	2.92	3.80
I speak my 1st language in class when my classmate starts talking to me in my 1st language while we are working on a task.	2.78	3.16	2.96	3.80
I speak my 1st language in class when I talk about personal things with my classmate.	2.70	2.84	2.79	3.20
I speak my 1st language with other members of my group in an English class because we want to finish the group activity faster.	2.70	3.32	2.58	3.20
Number of cases	27	19	24	5

Opinion in the use of 1st language in the class by year of study.

Furthermore, to find out if the opinion on the use of students' first language in acquiring English vary across study year, the following results was obtained as shown in table 1.4. Based on the results, the second year students will be generally more comfortable if more of their first language is being used in the English classroom. While 1st and 3rd-year students are neutral to the idea that using their first language in English class could help them understand the lesson better, 2nd and 4th-year students agree that this could help them to better understand the lesson. However, note should be taken on the fact that the second year students agree that it is important to have an English-only classroom policy but will be comfortable speaking only when their English level improves.

Table 1.4 Opinion in the use of 1st language in the class by year of study.				
Item	1st year mean	2nd year mean	3rd year mean	4th year mean
In English class, it is best to have a teacher who can understand my 1st language.	3.41	4.21	3.17	3.40
I would prefer to sit next to a classmate who speaks my 1st language in English class	2.70	3.53	2.88	3.40
I want to be able to speak my 1st language In English class when I feel I need to	2.96	3.11	3.13	3.60
I think English class should have an English-only policy (only English is allowed in the English classroom)	3.63	3.42	3.79	3.80
As my English improves, I become more comfortable speaking only English in English class.	3.96	4.32	3.96	3.60
It's important to speak only English in class as long as I am completing the course task.	3.89	4.32	4.21	3.60
Using dictionaries and resources in the 1st language should be allowed in English class.	3.44	4.00	3.79	3.80
Speaking my first language with my classmates during and between class activities should be okay as long as the course is not a speaking course.	3.04	3.68	3.17	3.80
Speaking my 1st language in English class helps me understand the lesson better.	3.22	4.21	3.63	4
I feel uncomfortable if I can't use my 1st language in an English class.	2.67	3.37	2.75	3.60
Numbers of cases	27	19	24	5

The implication of the study.

The primary focus of this study was to examine the student's perspective on the use of their first language in the English classroom. Though similar studies have been carried out elsewhere, this is the first study in the north-east of Thailand. The results indicate that students, in general, will feel more comfortable if their first language is used in class. These results go a long way to support (Cook, Using the first language in the classroom, 2001). In this article, Cook suggested that instead of trying unsuccessfully to eliminate the use of the first language in the second language classroom, teachers and educators should strategically use it as a classroom resource. This results will be of great help to English teachers in Ubon Ratchathani University and other institutions along the region as it will help them to more effectively manage their English language as well as other second language classrooms.

Following the results, it can be recommended that teachers and educators of second languages, should consider the first language as a classroom resource and try to effectively and efficiently find means of strategically using it in the classroom so as to help ease the pressure on their students and make the second language class more comfortable and enjoyable for them. However if not effectively and efficiently used, the first language could interfere with the teaching and learning of the second language. Using it is, therefore, a mix blessings and to be able to rip the benefits, educators most systematically design their lessons so as to make the most out of this resource.

Conclusion

To conclude though the debate as to whether there should be a place for the first language in a second language class continues to go on, this study found out that students believe that their first language if use in the learning of a second language, will help them to better understand the lessons. However if not used probably the first language could totally take over the second language class thereby making the teaching and learning process ineffective.

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