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EVALUATING TEACHER'S USE OF L1 IN ENGLISH EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR UNDERGRADUATES IN CHINA

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the contentious issue of language choice in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, particularly focusing on whether teachers should use students' first language (L1) or exclusively employ English (L2). The debate surrounding this topic has persisted for years, with proponents of L2 immersion arguing for increased English input to enhance language proficiency, while others advocate for the multifaceted roles L1 can play in the learning process. Adopting questionnaires and a focus group interview to analyze the current state of English teaching for undergraduates in Chinese universities, this study reveals the challenges faced by students, including dissatisfaction with existing teaching methods and their own proficiency levels. The research sheds light on the prevalent bilingual approach employed by teachers, balancing English and Chinese based on specific classroom situations. Despite efforts to implement monolingual classrooms, challenges arise due to linguistic diversity among students and the complexities of teaching intricate concepts solely in English. The paper also examines historical pedagogical methods, emphasizing the use of L1 to facilitate understanding and emotional connection, and contrasting approaches advocating maximal L2 input. By critically assessing language choice based on teaching goals, students' needs, and contextual factors, educators can strike a delicate balance, fostering linguistic development and preparing students for the globalized world effectively. This study emphasizes the importance of justifying language choices in ESL classrooms, ensuring a conducive learning environment while optimizing language input for students' benefit.

Keywords:

Teacher's Use Of L1, Bilingual Teaching, Monolingual Teaching, Undergraduate Education.

Introduction

What language(s) a teacher should adopt in teaching and learning English as L2 is a long-lasting controversial issue in TESL. Some may claim that teachers' L1 should be eliminated so as to immerse the students in English in hoping of increasing the English input as much as possible, as it holds that with enough put of L2, a learner's L2 language proficiency will be improved, as agreed by many scholars (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1997; Zhang, 2020; Yan, 2021; Yang, 2022). However, others stand in opposite to this view and support that teacher's use of L1 is not only necessary but also conducive to teaching and learning English since L1 can fulfill various roles, which English as L2 may not be able to do.

Chinese Ministry of Education and National Language Commission aspire to develop an English education program for undergraduates, which can adhere to the requirement embraced in monolingual policies (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China & National Language Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Students' English language proficiency is expected to improve from the envisioned program. However, in current ESL teaching, the monolingual policies always meet with diversified bilingual or even multilingual teaching practices. (Yan, 2016; Yan, 2021; Zhang, 2020; Hanakova & Metruk, 2017) The discrepancy between desired monolingual teaching policies and diversified teaching practices in reality leads to the dilemma which teachers cannot escape.

This paper delves into the ongoing debate regarding whether teachers should employ the students' first language (L1) or exclusively use English (L2) in ESL classrooms. While some advocate for complete immersion in English to enhance language input, others emphasize the multifaceted roles L1 can play in the learning process. This paper aims to explore the nuanced role of teachers' L1 use in English teaching for undergraduates in China, analyzing the current teaching methods, students' proficiency levels, and teachers' perspectives on language choice in the classroom.

Literature Review

The heated and controversial debate over whether teachers should exclude or include L1 in teaching and learning a second language has always aroused great attention and enjoyed a long history. Various studies have been carried out to explore the role of the use of teacher's language use.

Argument for Teacher's Use of L1

What became popular first is some teaching methods encouraging the use of L1. In the Middle Age, Grammar-translation Method arose as a way to teach Latin due to Latin's prominent status in government, business and other fields at that time. Adopting this method, students were required to put the grammatical rules teachers had explained before into practice by translating sentences from L1 to L2 and vice versa. In order to make these rules clearer and easier for students to understand, the lecture were conducted in L1. The Grammar-translation Method

has long been frowned upon for its shortcomings such as sheer mechanical memorization, more focus on written and reading abilities while ignorant on spoken ability, and so on.

The despise on Grammar-translation Method does not equal to the total elimination of L1 from the classroom. Another teaching method encouraging teacher's use of L1 is Community Language Learning, in which L1 was encouraged to be adopted in order to create a comfortable and friendly learning environment for students. But this method has been criticized for its lack of a syllabus, or that it requires too much of a teacher. However, teacher's use of L1 is undoubtedly playing a prominent role in the method. (Richards & Rodgers, 2000).

In addition, there already have some studies, which focused on the benefits teacher's use of L1 may bring. First of all, studies have found that students who receive monolingual instruction show better performance in language proficiency, compared with those who receive bilingual instruction. A study by Lindholm-Leary (2001) revealed that students who received instruction predominantly in English (L1) in a bilingual program had higher scores on standardized tests compared to students who were taught bilingually. Another study by Jin & Wen (2018) also concluded that L1 plays a positive role in developing learners' language skills to a great extent. Another empirical study by Liao (2006) on 351 university students in Taiwan concluded that translation between L1 and L2 seems to play an important factitive role in college students' English learning process. Second, teacher's use of L1 can facilitate in building emotional connection with students, as proposed in Community Language Learning. A study by Genesee, Paradis, and Crago (2004) found that teachers claim that they have more competence and confidence in teaching in L1. This is of great help in improving the classroom dynamics and stimulating student engagement. Lastly, it may serve as a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and preventing the unfair prejudice against the presence of L1. Nation (1990) has argued that the exclusion of the L1 is the criticism of the language itself, presenting a powerful prejudice again the language. Empirical evidence by Echevarria et al. (2011) showed that monolingual teaching can be effective in promoting English language development while still valuing and incorporating students' cultural identities.

Argument Against Teacher's Use of L1

As teaching methods encouraging the maximum use of L1 falls out of popularity, some teaching methods which, against teacher's use of L1, advocate the maximum input of L2, have arisen and exerted a much more profound influence in TESL. Among them, Direct Method and Natural Approach quite stand out. The former, supported by Gouin and Sauveur, held that classroom instruction should be exclusively conducted in L2. Without the need of translation, meanings can be connected with the language, so it should be "directly" communicated, hence the name. Despite its deficits such as ignoring the role of grammar and mechanical memorization without thorough understanding, some instructional practice still highlighted its role. An example is the study by Duff and Polio (1990), analyzing TL use in lower levels, which suggested some ways in which L2 use could be increased. Turnbull (2001), after a review of large-scale studies in the 1960s and 1970s, found there is a relationship between the proportion of teachers' TL use and students' TL achievement, although not a linear one. Natural Approach sees L2 input as the most important element in teaching and learning a foreign language, as supported by Krashen and Terrell "acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language." (Krashen & Terrell, 1983:19) So in-class time should be devoted to providing L2 input as much as possible. Although criticized for its lack of creativity and novelty, it has been proven useful and productive to some degree.

Studies have also found out that the exclusion of L1 in class is of much benefit. First and foremost, it is beneficial to improvement of students' L2 linguistic abilities. Seligson (1997), once claimed that "By using English most or all of the time in class, you give students vital listening practice, and the opportunity to respond naturally to spoken English." (Seligson, 1997:22) More importantly, since students are more likely to replicate the language their teacher adopts, they will get more chance to practice their spoken ability when their teacher adopt L2 in class. (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Polio & Duff, 1994; Macaro, 2001) So students can have their listening and spoken ability enhanced with the maximum input of L2. Moreover, the more L2 input is provided for students, the more likely to foster a learning atmosphere, where students may communicate with each other in L2 both in class and out of class.

In sum, history has shown that various pedagogical methods have influenced teachers' language choices. The Grammar-Translation Method, emphasizing translation between L1 and L2, was prevalent in the Middle Ages, aiming to make grammatical rules comprehensible. Community Language Learning advocated for L1 use to foster a supportive learning environment, focusing on emotional connections and rapport between teachers and students. While studies highlight the benefits of L1 use, such as improved language proficiency, emotional bonding, and cultural preservation, contrasting methods like the Direct Method and Natural Approach advocate for maximal L2 input to enhance listening and speaking abilities.

Methodology

In Chinese universities and colleges, English teaching programs for undergraduates often follow traditional exam-oriented methods. These approaches emphasize grammatical accuracy over fluent spoken output, leading to significant disparities between teaching goals and outcomes. In order to have a clearer picture of undergraduates' satisfaction for current ESL teaching situation in China, the study conducted two questionnaires, containing questions followed by multiple choices, in which participants were asked to choose one or more choices based on the requirement set for each question. One questionnaire was administered to students for their opinions about current ESL teaching and their own assessment of their English language proficiency. The other was for teachers' willingness and experience in implementing the monolingual policy, according to which, English is the only language adopted in the classroom. Both questionnaires were distributed through wenjuanxing, a wechat applet. The questionnaire for students was distributed to 250 undergraduates in a Chinese university. Altogether 223 questionnaires were fully collected while the rest were not complete, thus being discarded. The other questionnaire was distributed to 130 ESL teachers from 28 Chinese universities and colleges, with 124 responses collected in full answer. The data from both questionnaires would be used for its descriptive statistics for writing up the paper later.

Moreover, a focus group interview was conducted to explore teachers' language adoption in ESL teaching for undergraduate education in China since it can provide with more in-depth, more unfiltered response for the study. (George, 2023) 10 ESL teachers in 2 Chinese universities were invited to attend the interview. The focus group interview was carried out in a quiet and comfortable teacher's office in one of the university. Participants were invited to the interview in their after-class free time so there would be no time restraint for them. The data from the focus group interview would go through the thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Six phases of the thematic analysis would follow: to familiarize

yourself with your data; to generate initial codes; to generate themes; to review potential theme, to define and name themes; and to product the report.

Results and Findings

Current English Teaching for Undergraduates in China: Challenges and Opportunities

The questionnaire conducted among students reveal widespread dissatisfaction with their English proficiency levels and the existing teaching methods. As institutions grapple with the challenge of producing linguistically proficient graduates, the need to reassess teaching strategies becomes imperative. The results are shown in the following tables.

Table 1: Results of Students' Self-assessment of Their Weakest Abilities in English




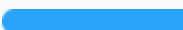






Which ability(es) do you think is/are your weakest ability in English?	Number	Percentage
Listening	190	 85.2%
Speaking	170	 76.23%
Reading	106	 47.53%
Writing	146	 65.47%
Interpreting & Translation	156	 69.96%

Table 2: Result of Whether Students are Satisfied with Current English Teaching

Are you satisfied with Current English Teaching in your university?	Number	Percentage
Very satisfied	10	 4.48%
Satisfied	21	 9.42%
No feelings	92	 41.26%
Dissatisfied	79	 35.43%
Very dissatisfied	21	 9.42%

From both tables, it clearly shows that many of the students are satisfied with neither their own English language proficiency nor the current English teaching.

Trapped in this vicious circumstance, English teachers in Chinese universities and colleges is faced with a serious and thought-provoking question: how to adjust their teaching language more suitable for the production of the nation's future development qualified talents, among the different varieties, one of which should be equipped with both practical application of

linguistic abilities and the harmonious development of the knowledge, ability and comprehensive qualities.

Current Situation of Teacher's Language Use: Striking a Balance

Within the current teaching landscape, teachers employ a bilingual approach, using both English and Chinese based on specific classroom situations. English is predominantly used for simple instructions, greetings, and when students are encouraged to respond in English. On the other hand, teachers resort to L1 in emotionally charged situations, when providing complex feedback, explaining difficult concepts, and bridging gaps in understanding. This flexible language use attempts to balance the need for English immersion with the necessity of ensuring students comprehend and engage effectively with the material. As revealed from the questionnaire and the focus group interview, teachers tend to use English when English can fulfill the following functions in the following situations, as shown in the table below.

Table 3: Situations when Teachers Adopt English in Class

Communication function	When teachers give simple instructions
	When teachers greet their students, ask questions, especially simple questions, or give short and simple feedbacks such as “great”, “good job”, “congratulations”, etc.
	When teachers want the students to answer in English
Textual function	When teachers read texts in teaching materials or anything written in English on their slides
	When teachers explain the translation tasks
Others	When teachers are in some other situations they feel necessary and suitable to use English, such as when they have to had open classes, as mentioned above

On the other hand, L1 is usually adopted in the following situations, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: Situations when Teachers Adopt L1 in Class

Emotion function	When teachers want to build good rapport with students, such as making humorous jokes, showing concern for students, etc.
Communication function	When teachers give long and complicated feedbacks
	When teachers helps students get clear about what they want to express
Textual function	When teachers read texts in teaching materials or anything written in L1 on their slides
	When teachers explain the translation tasks
Explaining function	When teachers feel the need to explain what they have talked in English but students fail to grasp, such as obscure grammatical rules or concepts, school policies concerning the course, etc.
Others	When teachers are in some other situations they feel necessary and suitable to use L1, such as when they have to cover too much in a short period of time

To bridge the great gap existing between the desired effect of English teaching and the disappointing facts, universities and colleges have tried various ways to aid in improving students' English proficiency, including introducing new teaching materials, providing more varied English courses for students to choose from and so on. One of them, which has invited great discussion among both teachers and students, is to implement monolingual classroom, in which teachers are required to adopt English exclusively in in-class teaching period. For example, Tsinghua University set the rule in 2001 that 54 out of all the courses should be taught in English, not only in English courses but other courses, too, so as to immerse students in English, with the hope of improving their English language proficiency. In reality, however, the monolingual policy always encounters with greater linguistic diversity than initially believed (Yan, 2016; Yan, 2021; Zhang, 2020; Hanakova & Metruk, 2017). It is not that teachers do not own the will to implement an all-English classroom. Quite to the opposite, quite a few teachers do wish to try it, and some of them have already done. The results to the questionnaire for ESL teachers turned out that more than 70% of the teachers had ever thought about monolingual classroom and about half of these teachers had once tried to implement monolingual classroom in their teaching, but did not stick for long. Only 17 teachers (accounting for 13.71%) had ever carried out monolingual classroom for more than 5 weeks, and only 2 teachers (accounting for 1.61%) had stuck to monolingual classroom for a whole semester.

When going deeper for the reasons behind in later focus group interview, the top three reasons mentioned most were that:

1. the teaching progress might get slowed down because much more time would be spent in explaining obscure points, thus leading to that they might not be able to finish the teaching content as planned;
2. they would be discouraged from students' feedback, as about half of them claimed in the interview "when I see the confused faces, I... feel discouraged / seem to lose the enthusiasm for teaching in English only;
3. they were afraid that they might not be able to complete the English-only classroom for the whole semester since 8 teachers stated with such expressions as "it is too much of a burden", or "A whole semester? No, I don't think I can stick for that long. Maybe only a few classes is OK."

Thus, it can be concluded that efforts to implement monolingual classrooms have faced challenges due to the linguistic diversity among students and the complexities of teaching abstract or intricate concepts solely in English. Despite teachers' willingness to explore this approach, concerns about slowing down the curriculum pace, discouragement from students' confused expressions, and the practicality of sustaining an all-English environment persist. Paradoxically, teachers express eagerness to adopt monolingual classrooms as a testament to their proficiency and teaching prowess when observed by colleagues and school leaders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of teachers' L1 use in ESL classrooms is multifaceted. Acknowledging the inherent challenges and benefits, educators must strike a delicate balance between providing adequate English input and ensuring students comprehend complex concepts. To begin with, that the teacher's L1 use is always present and unavoidable in an ESL class has been an unanimous fact. Although in history, it has been found out that the only use of L1 in

an ESL classroom might do little, if any, good to the improvement of students' English language abilities, teacher's use of L1 does interfere with L2 and it serves for various purposes. (Otwindowska, 2017; Paker & Karaagac, 2015). Secondly, teacher's L1 use can play as varied beneficial roles in an ESL classroom. In English teaching for undergraduates in China, teacher's use of L1 can be conducive to explaining difficulties and ambiguity, to building rapport with students, to lower students' affective filter, and so on. The effect of teacher's L1 use should never be ignored and underestimated. Lastly, English teachers should think twice before choosing the language(s) adopted in the classroom and be careful and serious in allocating the time spent in each language. As emphasized by Turnbull (2001, 535) "it is crucial for teachers to use the TL as much as possible in contexts in which students spend only short periods of time in class on a daily basis, and when they have little contact with the TL outside the classroom", the more time spent in L1 in an ESL classroom means the less time spent in English. That most time spent in L1 may be suitable for beginners, but not for advanced learners as undergraduates, who need a vast amount of English input to improve their English language proficiency in all linguistic abilities. By doing so, educators can optimize language choice to create a conducive learning atmosphere, foster linguistic development, and prepare students to navigate the globalized world effectively. In a nutshell, it is natural for human being to turn to their L1 to explain whatever a foreign language fail to do. Teachers should not be guilty about using L1 in an ESL classroom. However, teacher's L1 use should be justified in an appropriate way. Which language should be adopted should be decided after a comprehensive analysis of various factors, such as the teaching goals, students' language levels and needs, class contexts and so on. Further studies and researches are recommended to focus their attention from these perspectives.

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