

## **FIRST LANGUAGE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: IS IT NECESSARY?**

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### ***Abstract***

To maintain the class alive, language choice used in the classroom plays an important role. So far, some English teachers have thought that they have to use English in the classroom during the learning process because it will encourage the learners to think and speak in English. In contrast, some research shows that the use of first language (L1) in the classroom will give positive benefits in the learners' understanding to the subject learnt and responds during the discussion. This paper is intended to describe the positive effect and benefits of using L1 in the EFL classroom.

***Keywords:*** EFL (English Foreign Language), First language, Monolingual

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language is the medium for all people to communicate. People learn English with the reason that it is an international language. In Indonesia, learning English is more challenging compared to other countries where English is a second language. All of the learners do not use it in their daily communication, as a result, they become passive language learners in the classroom because they feel that they are difficult in using and understanding English. The misguided assumptions on the nature of English are when English is considered as the most difficult language in the world and the non-native speakers' speech organs and ear might not match English (Mattarima and Hamdan, xxxx). Moreover, they are not supported by conducive situation such as; high demand on the learners to use English all the time with no grammatical errors. Hence, these learners expect there is a classroom discourse where their first language become the main language used, so that the knowledge and language skill delivered to them without much effort. Many studies (Broks & Donato, 1994; Swan & Lapkin, 2000; Anton & DiCamila, 1998; Storch & Wiggleworth, 2003; Storch & Aldosari, 2010 in Ghorbani, 2011) reported that classroom discourse focused on first language (L1) for the purpose of task management and facilitating deliberations over vocabularies.

Yanfen and Yuqin (2010) argue that interaction in classroom involving the exchange of thoughts, feeling, and ideas. Through this interaction, learners will gain more language skill resulted in the improvement in their language skill. This interaction demands the contribution of both teacher and students. However, in classroom discourse, teacher has more control than the students. The importance of teacher talk is highlighted by Matsumoto (2010) who argues that teacher talk is the key to determine how successful the teaching-learning process. This argument is supported by one common problem of classroom discourse that teacher talk is taking a dominant portion of the class.

In classroom discourse, especially EFL classroom discourse, language plays an important role, especially in the teacher talk. Teacher should be aware with his language choice in determining which language work best to deliver the knowledge in his teacher talk. Pratiwi (2019) believes that the choice of language in teacher talk influences the students' success and failure because the choice of language is the key to construct or obstruct the learner participation.

To create an effective way to help learners to gain a good achievement, the classroom discourse should be designed in such a way that gives positive atmosphere for the learners. Teacher should be able to be good communicators and facilitators in the classroom which resulting on the learners' enjoyment during learning process. Some helpful ideas to teach English to Foreign language learners include supplementing activities with visuals, realia and movement, involving the learners in making visuals and realia, moving from one activity to another, and teaching themes using stories and context familiar to the learners (Shin, 2006). However, there is a strategy which contradicts among the English teacher, that is bilingual instructions. Instead of using English all the time in the classroom, it is advisable for teachers to use L1 just for example, to identify key instructional features. McGoarty in Celce-Murcia (2001) says that any learners have potential to benefit from a bilingual approach to instruction as long as the particular choice suits the learner's linguistic situation and provides good quality instruction.

However, different opinions which assert that the teacher and learners can exchange in the L1 without harming the communicative focus on the foreign language lessons. Atkinson (1993) in Mattioli emphasizes that L1 can be a vital resource and there is certainly no reason why any teacher of monolingual classes just like in Indonesia should feel that it is somehow wrong "to make use of it. For example: the expression of "once upon time". It will be an easier way to make that expression comprehensible by using L1. After the teacher quickly explains a difficult expression like that in L1, learners will recognize the expression in English every time it comes up in a story. Since English Foreign language teachers usually have a limited amount of time with learners in many classroom situations, that time to too precious waste. Shin (2006) adds it will be more efficient to concentrate on building communicative skills and save the time for the target language that is actually within learners' reach.

In countries where English is a foreign language, the acquisition of foreign language is closely determined by the influence of their mother tongue (Pratiwi: 2019). Despite

several theories supporting the use of L2 as the medium of interaction in the classroom discourse, there are several studies supporting vice versa. Mokhtar (2015) argues that code-switching is helping the students' understanding and it is efficient to avoid lengthy explanation. Voicu (2012) even believes that capability in mastering foreign language is hard to meet when learner does not entrust foreign language into some extent of his mother tongue. For example, in understanding several context of the vocabularies, the learner needs to compare and contrasting several examples in his mother tongue. Khati (2011) & Ma (2016) strongly assert that mother tongue is the greatest resource for any foreign language acquisition.

In other words, if the learners get used to the English language, they will not feel difficult anymore to comprehend the English utterance because they have heard and use English in the classroom all the time. Thus, English teachers often feel bad when they have to use L1 in the classroom because many English teaching language professionals claim that L1 use in the classroom is unthinkable and it should not be used in the classroom nowadays. They refuse the use of L1 because they think that the learners cannot truly appreciate meaningful target language exchange if they are continually relying on their L1. Another positive point of using L1 in the classroom is the use of L1 gives a sense of security and validates the learner lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. Some learners who have very low proficiency can easily become discouraged when all communication in the classroom must be in English. Garrett et.al (1994: 372) in Mattioli argues that the use of mother tongue is a signal to the learners that their language and culture has value, and this will have a beneficial and consequently, on achievement.

Looking at the above benefits, this paper aims to present the insights of positive benefits in using L1 in the English classroom.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Common Issues in EFL Classroom Discourse**

Based on the writer's observation while teaching English in the Vocational High School (SMK), there are several issues in the classroom discourse. Firstly, many learners feel that they have no competence to construct good sentences so that they have no courage to talk in English. This lead to their reluctant to respond to the teacher's questions because they are afraid of making mistakes, Secondly, they have no motivation to study English because they feel that English is too difficult fro them to learn and they have no reasons for using it outside the classroom.

Marcellino (2008) proposed at least three primary reasons why learners were normally passive in class and only respond to the teacher's questions when asked. (1) Most teachers use teacher-centered approach. Therefore, when the new approach is applied, the learners seem not to get accustomed to it. Consequently, they prefer to keep silent and listening to the teacher's explanation. (2) Their cultural values and beliefs somehow do not encourage them to challenge neither their teachers nor their classmates as it may somewhat indicate that they are showing off. (3) The survey shows that their command of

English is relatively very poor-lack of vocabulary and expressions as well as mastery of grammar, their feeling ashamed of making mistakes-so they speak Indonesian most of the time in class settings.

### **Teachers' Talk in EFL Classroom Discourse**

Brown defines Teaching is showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge, causing to know or understand (Brown, 2007: 8). It means that teacher is someone who is showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge, causing to know or understand.

Harmer (2001: 108-110) emphasizes that, in the classroom, teachers have different roles. First, being a Controller. It means that teachers are in charge of the class and of the activity taking place and are often "leading from the front". Controllers take the register, tell learners things, organise drills, read aloud and in various other ways exemplify the qualities of a teacher-fronted classroom. Second, being a prompter. In an activity such as a role-play, learners might lose thread of what is going on, or they are 'lost for words'. They might not be sure how to proceed, as a prompt, a teacher should hold back and let the work things out for themselves or, instead, 'nudge' them forward in a discreet and supportive way. Third, being a participant. A teacher will involve in an activity not (only) as a teacher but also as a participant in the activity. Fourth, being a resource. In some activities, teachers may be as a recourse to whom the learners ask how to say or write something, ask what a word or phrase means. They might want to know information in the middle of an activity about that activity or they want information about where to look for something – a book, a website. This is where a teacher can be one of the most important resources. The last, being a tutor. It is a combination role of being a prompter and a resource. It can be done when the learners are working on longer projects, such as process writing or preparation for a talk or a debate. Finally, it can be stated that the roles of a teacher in the classroom is to make the learning process generally and learning English especially, easier and in a good atmosphere.

### **The Bilingual Approach**

The Monolingual Approach has been criticized by researchers, teachers, and learners, who hold that L1 use is beneficial in EFL classes at more than one level. In other words, the use of the mother tongue is looked at as a common feature in EFL, and is a natural act which seems to make positive contribution to the learning process if used judiciously. Researchers who approve this approach such as Atkinson (1993); Macaro (2001); Deller and Rinvulcri (2002) ; Widdowson (2003) ; Aurbuch (1998) and Harbord (1992) argue that L1 represents a powerful source that can be used to enhance FL learning, but it should be used in a principled way. Macaro (2001) argues that it is not only impractical to exclude

the L1 from the classroom, but that it is also likely to suffer learners of an important tool for language learning.

Similarly, Aurbuch (cited in Sharma, 2006: 81) not only acknowledges the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom, but also identifies the following uses of it: language analysis, class management, presenting grammar rules, giving instructions, explaining difficult vocabulary, explaining errors and checking for comprehension. Similarly, Harbord (1992) points out that many ELT teachers have tried to create English-only classrooms, but have found that they have failed to make the learners comprehend the meaning of English sentences. According to Mukattash (2003: 224), using L1 in EFL teaching has been found to "facilitate both teaching and learning, systematize comprehension of EFL structures and items and hence leads to meaningful learning." In other words, instead of leaving the learner to struggle over how to relate L1 structures to EFL structures, it seems plausible to guide learners wherever guidance seems to be necessary.

### **Pros and Cons of the Use of First Language in EFL Classroom Discourse**

The use of L1 in EFL classes is still debated. There are some educators who agree with the use of it but some disagree. Those who disagree say that it will make the learners become dependent on it, and not even try to understand meaning from context and explanation, or express what they want to say within their limited command of the target language (EFL) – both of which are important skills which they will need to use when communicating in the real situation. The monolingual approach says Sharma, (2006: 80) in Hasan, the rationale for using only the target language in the classroom is that "the more learners are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it to begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it." In contrast, those who support the use of L1 in teaching English as a foreign language argue that the use of English all the time in classrooms can be time consuming if the English words are too difficult to understand. The use of L1 can be used as a tool to show the similarities and distinction of language structure.

Furthermore, L1 can be used with beginners or learners with limited English proficiency for pre-lesson small talk which allows the teacher to get to know the learners and for discussions to explain the course methodology. When learners are trying to say something but having difficulty, they can say it in their own language and the teacher can reformulate it for them. If the teacher does not speak the learners' language, it can be useful for them (the learners) to have a bilingual dictionary in the classroom so that they can double check their comprehension of lexical explanations.

Those argumentations above are supported by Cianflone (2009), in his research on L1 use in English courses. She finds that the interviewed learners and teachers seem favorable to L1 use in terms of explanation of grammar, vocabulary items, difficult concepts and for general comprehension. He concludes that learners seem to prefer L1 use and teachers

subscribe to using L1 judiciously. Such use, being at the university level, may save time and increase learners' motivation.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design. The subjects of the research are 38 students in one of the public vocational schools in Surabaya. The data are taken in two months. The data are collected through checklist observation and open-ended interviews. After the data are collected, they are analyzed by using the theory on L1 and classroom discourse.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Ways of Using First Language in EFL Classroom Discourse**

It is possible to use L1 in the classroom as long as it is used wisely and positively to support the easier way to learn Foreign Language (FL). The activities by which the first language can be used in the classroom include conveying the meaning and the class organization.

The use of L1 by teacher to convey and check the meaning of words or sentences is time-efficient and helpful for the learning activity. It does not mean that teaching should relate all meaning to the L1. Since many differences of vocabulary and meaning cannot be covered by giving a translation equivalent, the use of L1 is necessary. Besides, a teacher may use L1 for explaining grammar although, sometimes, it is not effective to explain grammatical rules to EFL learners due to their lack of English utterances understanding. These difficulties will be more complex when the learners must understand English grammar rules and the teacher's way of explaining in English. The only way to minimize those difficulties is by switching to L1, instead of using English all the time. Also, when the learners have difficulties in comprehend the meaning of instruction, it is wise to use L1. It is aimed to avoid misunderstanding the meaning of those instructions which can lead to learners' failure in doing the exercises correctly.

The class organization deals with the ways the teacher organizing the class and his choice of language. Some of the possible activities may involve the L1 use for organizing tasks. To carry out a task, the learners have to understand what they have to do. Nunan (1995) asserts that task organization is closely related to understanding the instructions. Unless translated into the L1, these instructions are unlikely to be more than words on the page, partially comprehensible through the teacher's skill at demonstration. Again, the argument for the L1 is efficiency which leads to a more effective learning. Besides, The need to maintain control over High school classes often calls for the L1. Saying 'Shut up or you will get a detention' in the L1 is a sign of a serious threat rather than practicing imperative and conditional constructions. If this command is in English, this sign of threat can not be accepted. Again, the reason for the L1 may partly be efficiency of comprehension, partly to show it is real rather than pretend. Further, Telling a learner how well they have done in their own language may make this more 'real'. According to

Franklin (1990), the L1 is predominantly used for correction of written homework. The teacher may also switch to the L1 to make personal remarks to a learner, for instance, when a learner has a coughing fit (Polio & Duff, 1994, p.318 in Cook, 2008).

Of course, there are other possibilities that learners use the L1 in learning, both in the classroom and outside, particularly as a way to understand the meanings of FL. First is the use of bilingual dictionaries, which 85% of learners find it useful (Schmitt, 1997). Second possibility is dual language texts on facing pages (Roberts, 1999). Third is the use of FL films with L1 subtitles, sometimes found as an option in video techniques in CD-ROMs through which the learners exploit L1 principally for getting the meanings of the FL.

### **The Benefits of Using First Language in EFL Classroom Discourse**

Based on the writer's experience teaching in one of the Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Surabaya, the first language has an important role and benefits for both teacher and learners to play in conveying meaning and content. The use of L1 can prevent time being wasted on tortuous explanations and instructions, when it could be better spent on language practice. With the learners who mostly have no high competence in English, it may even allow the teacher to use activities which would be impossible to explain otherwise. L1 can be used to show problem areas of grammar, false cognates etc. Bergsleighner's (2002) discovered that L1 was adapted by the teacher effectively facilitate learners' comprehension of grammar topics. Besides, L1 can be used with beginners for pre-lesson small talk which allows the teacher to get to know the learners as people, and for discussions to explain the course objectives etc. In addition, beginners will be less tense if they know they can at least ask for, and possibly receive, explanation in the L1.

When learners are trying to say something but difficult to say so, they can say it in their own language and the teacher can reformulate it for them, possibly rephrasing and simplifying to show them how they could have expressed themselves within the language they already know. Also, some learners need to combine the two languages – for example those whose jobs involve translation and interpreting. Translation is a skill which needs to be taught. Further, teachers can use L1 to give feedback to the learners and maintain discipline in the classroom because most of the learners will sometimes ignore the teacher's warnings and instructions in English due to their ignorance. Finally, by using L1, the teacher will help the learners to feel free and relaxed during the learning process so that friendly learning atmosphere can be reached. L1 is used as an affective strategy for reducing learning anxiety and increasing their motivation to learn English (Liao, 2006), 9) Friendly relationship between the teacher and learners can be met because they can maintain good communication and their interest in learning English.

### **CONCLUSION**

Finally, rather than the L1 is seen as a guilt-making necessity, it can be deliberately and systematically used in the classroom because of its benefit when it is implemented in

the classroom such as it can prevent time being wasted on difficult explanations and instructions, it can be used contrastively to point out problem areas of grammar, false cognates, etc. Learners' receptive competence (their understanding) may be higher than their productive competence (their ability to use the language). Thus, sometimes they need to use L1 to respond the teachers's questions. It can be used for pre-lesson small talk which allows the teacher to get to know the learners and to explain the course objectives etc., to avoid discouraging the learners when explaining something in English, possibly rephrasing and simplifying to show them how they could have expressed themselves within the language they already know.

The results of the studies do not state strongly and suggest greater use of L1 than target language in EFL classroom, but rather to clarify if teachers should use the learners L1 when there is a need for it and whether the principle of teaching English through English is reasonable.

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