

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES TOWARD L1 USE IN EARLY ENGLISH IMMERSION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Recently, many more pre-schools in Indonesia offer English immersion programs. As English is only a foreign language, a question concerning the classroom language may then raise. Is it possible to use English only and avoid the use of L1 to pre-school aged children? This study tried to investigate this issue from the teachers' perspectives. The interviews and classroom observations data showed that L1 was still necessary to use. All participants believed that this was due to the role of each of the languages in the children's daily life. Moreover, the data also showed that L1 was used for several purposes.

Keywords: native language, target language, national language, L1 and L2.

Introduction

There have been contradicting views on the use of L1 in foreign language classrooms. While the proponents of monolingual approach claim that the use of L1 can hinder the target language learning (Krashen, 1981; Turnbull, 2001), many researchers (e.g. Atkinson, 1993; Auerbach, 1993; Widdowson, 2003) have found that L1 use was potentially beneficial.

Cook (2001) explained three fundamental supports for monolingual approach. First is the belief that L2 learning has a similar process as when children acquire their L1. Hence, a massive amount of L2 exposure is needed. Second, L1 and L2 are perceived as two distinct systems. Since the use of L1 can cause overgeneralization, L1 and L2 should be separated. Third, L2 has to be used as a medium of interactions in order to provide learners with a range of natural samples of L2.

In recent years, more scholars (e.g. Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002; Zacharias, 2004; Shimizu, 2006; Anh, 2010) have corroborated the value of L1 in foreign language classrooms. Tang (2002), for instance, claimed that the use of L1 can assist the teaching and learning process. Strategies such as translating words into

L1 and making contrasts between L1 and L2 forms may facilitate acquisition (Rolin-Ianzity and Brownlie, 2002), and evidence shows that code-switching can enhance input by making linguistic items more salient (Turnbull and Arnett, 2002).

Zacharias (2004) metaphorically describes the use of L1 as 'a shelter'. The L1 use could create a less threatening atmosphere. Shimizu (2006) mentioned that it is often extremely difficult for beginners to make themselves understood in monolingual English classroom settings. L1, in this case, can be of beneficial. Anh

(2010) found that L1 was useful in some situations. There were three most popular situations in which L1 should be used, i.e. when explaining grammatical points, when explaining new words, and when checking for understanding.

Most of the studies, however, have been conducted in secondary and tertiary level (e.g. Kim and Petrarki, 2009; Miles, 2004; Tang, 2002). As Cameron (2001) noted, research on language use in primary level is still fairly thin on the ground. Moreover, the research on English immersion program is mostly conducted in ESL context rather than EFL context (Philp and Tognini, 2009), in which the teacher and students may not share the same L1. With the mushrooming of early English learning programs in EFL contexts, this study tried to fill this gap.

Children have amazing ability in acquiring languages. When being exposed to more than one languages at early age, they can acquire all the languages equally well. With such a belief, many more pre schools in Indonesia start to offer early English immersion programs in which English is used as ‘the vehicle for content instructions’, not as ‘the subject of instructions’ (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Pinter (2006) points out that since children in L2 or FL classes are still in the process of learning their L1, the L2 acquisition process will be similar to the L1. With a massive amount of L2 exposure and meaningful interaction in L2, the children can acquire the target language easily. While this is true for children in ESL contexts, what about children in EFL context? Can English immersion classrooms provide the same natural situation as in ESL context?

English in Indonesia is only a foreign language. One may then notice great challenges the teachers face. First, the children do not have an obvious need to learn English. Second, the English exposure the children can get is limited to classroom exposure only, and the teachers become the only source of language. Third, the pre-school children are still at the level of early speech stages. Two year old children, in particular, are still at the level of telegraphic speech –two-and three-word utterances (Steinberg, Nagata, and Aline, 2001). Fourth, the teachers have to introduce the children concepts in English, the language they rarely hear in their daily life.

Those challenges lead to more questions. Do teachers have to avoid using L1 at all cost? Is there any guarantee that by applying total English immersion context, children can acquire English successfully? If the use of L1 is allowed in English immersion classrooms, to what extent can it be used? With pre-school aged children, talk becomes the main means of communication and the main source of language input (Moon, 2004). The limited use of English will restrict both the quality and quantity of input available to learners (Kim and Elder, 2005; Tognini, 2008 in Philp and Tognini, 2009). The use of English at all time, however, will create distance to their students (Cameron, 2001).

Concerning such an issue, this study tried to explore the use of L1 in EFL pre-school contexts from the teachers’ point of view. One main research question would be addressed, i.e. what are the pre-school teachers’ perspectives toward the use of L1 in the classrooms. It is hoped that the results of this study can shed light onto the L1 use particularly for teaching English to pre-school aged children in EFL contexts.

Method

Context and Participants

Four teachers from two different pre-schools in Salatiga participated in this study. Salatiga is a small town in Central Java, and recently pre-schools offering early English immersion programs have been mushrooming. These two schools were among others that used English as a medium of instructions.

The participants were selected on the basis of their availability and willingness to be interviewed and observed. Three of them were from English teacher training department, and one participant was still pursuing her S1 in early childhood education (PAUD). Their experience in teaching young learners is ranging from four months to eight years.

Instruments

The data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The aim of the interviews was to identify the teachers' views toward the use of L1 in their English only classroom. The main questions were why the teachers thought L1 was necessary to use, to what extent they used L1 in the classroom, and when and/or for what purposes they thought that L1 would be of help. The interviews lasted between 15 – 20 minutes. To ease the participants, the interviews were conducted in Indonesian. The classroom observations were carried out to cross check the interview data.

Data Analysis

The interview data were transcribed and coded as the main source of this study. Some points or themes emerged were then grouped. The quote examples from the data from the data collected were given to support each point in the process of analyzing the data. The data was analyzed descriptively, and some supporting theories were included to carry out the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Language setting in Indonesia

The main point that all the participants highlighted referred to the language setting in Indonesia. According to Pinter (2001), language setting covers all the languages and their varieties used by speakers in all communities either at home or at work. This includes minority languages, dialects, and second and/or foreign languages.

All participants clearly pointed to the issue on the role of each of the languages, i.e. the role of the children's native language, the role of the national language, and the role of English. They all agreed that pre-school aged children had to be exposed to English in the classrooms, without neglecting Indonesian. This is due to the fact that Indonesian is the language used in the children's daily life.

As a multilingual country, Indonesia has many language varieties. Some children may grow up with their native language as their L1, while others grow up with Indonesian as their L1. Regardless which L1 the children have, there is a norm that all children need to acquire Indonesian, “the symbol of national identity” (Holmes, 2008). Although the teachers have to introduce English in the English immersion classrooms, they still feel responsible for introducing the children to the national language as well. As Teacher D noted,

In some cases, there are children whose first language is Javanese. They speak Javanese at home. The teachers, then, have to work twice. First is to introduce English words. When some children respond in Javanese instead of Indonesian, the teacher needs to ‘correct’ that. (My translation)

Regarding the language exposure, the teachers argued that it was impossible to avoid the use of L1 in the classroom. They feared that exposing L2 only to young children will give negative effect to their L1 acquisition. As Teacher A noted,

Indonesian is still necessary. If we expose them only in English, they might not be able to communicate in Indonesian. Children need to socialize. Our community speaks Indonesian not English. (My own translation)

Although there is no evidence that early L2 exposure would retard or negatively influence the learning of L1, such a fear has become an argument against early L2 learning, (Steinberg, Nagata & Aline, 2001). Studies that claimed the negative effect of early L2 exposure (e.g. Smith, 1939; Bereiter and Engelman, 1966) were conducted at the early half of the twentieth century when positivists still became research orientations and when FL learning was not yet fully accepted (Steinberg, Nagata & Aline, 2001).

Since English is not spoken in the children’s daily life, they do not “feel deep emotional needs for the language” (Paul, 2003). Moreover, children might not feel comfortable when using English. They might feel alien as their other friends don’t speak the same language. As Teacher B noted,

Sometimes children feel shy when using English. They feel uncomfortable when speaking in English, while their other friends speak in Indonesian or Javanese. (My own translation)

To be accepted in a society, one has to speak the same language. The children, in this case, have unconsciously learned the sense of acceptance. Although, they actually can choose which language to use when conversing quite easily, the school context is a bit complex for them to do so. Although English is immersed at school, the fact still shows that not all children speak English to each

other. Some of them can speak English very well, while others still speak using their native language.

The use of bilingual approach in English immersion program

All the participants agreed on the use of L1, Indonesian in this case, when teaching English to pre-school aged children. They viewed L1 as a ‘classroom resource’ (Atkinson, 1987). However, they admitted the different amount of L1 use in their classrooms. When teaching two to three year old children, for instance, the comparison between English use and L1 use was 50:50. With the older children, the comparison was 70:30. This decision concerning the language use was made due to the fact that Indonesian is the children’s L1. This idea was clearly represented by Teacher A:

It is impossible to use English at all times. This is because Indonesian is their mother tongue. They communicate in Indonesian in their daily life. If we speak English only, the children can’t understand what we are saying. So, we need to speak using both English and Indonesian. (My own translation)

The observation data showed that to make the children understand the message, the teachers translated each of their English utterances into Indonesian. This is what the participants meant by 50:50 use of English and Indonesian when teaching younger learners. The following extracts illustrate this particular point.

Extract 1:

T : Miss Tina is so hungry.
: Miss Tina lapar. (*Miss Tina is hungry*)
: Let’s eat!
: Mari kita makan. (*Let’s eat!*)
: ...
(*Teacher is showing a carrot*)
: Carrot is good for your health.
: Bagus untuk kesehatan. (*good for your health.*)

Extract 2:

T : Do not jump over the line.
: Jangan melompati garis ya. (*Don’t jump over the line!*)
: ...
: Alice, sit nicely!
: Duduk dulu! (*Sit, please!*)
: ...
: Give your sheets to Ms. Tyas!
: Dikasih ke Ms. Tyas ya. (*Give it to Ms. Tyas, please.*)

All the teachers claimed that they used L1 less often when teaching older learners. Instead of translating each of the L2 sentences into L1, they tried to use other strategies, such as giving definitions, explanation, etc. As teacher D noted,

With pre-school children, we need to translate many English utterances into Indonesian. With kindergarten children, we use less translation technique. When delivering materials to kindergarten children, we try to use as much English as possible. (My own translation)

Observing the teacher talks, it was found out that that the teachers tend to speak English first, and then translated their English utterance into Indonesian. The use of L1, in this case, can be used by the children to check and evaluate their understanding. As teacher A stated,

We translate English sentence into Indonesian and not the other way around because if we use Indonesian first, the children will focus on the Indonesian words rather than English. When we speak English first, they will catch the English words first. When we translated that into Indonesian, they could check their understanding. They finally can acquire the English words. (My own translation)

Children learn language by self-discovery. When they are given L2 input, they will try to analyze and discover the meaning (Steinberg, Nagata, and Aline, 2001). The teachers' use of L1 will then be used to test their hypothesis.

As English is only a foreign language, the children do not use the language in their daily life. The children, however, come from various family backgrounds. Some parents have started exposing English even before their children come to school, while others, unfortunately, cannot speak the language. With this various children's English ability, the use of L1 could bridge the gap between the students who didn't have any English ability yet and those who did. As Teacher C noted,

There are children who can understand me talking in English, but there are others who can't understand it. For those children, I need to translate my words into Indonesian. (My own translation)

Observing their friends who can understand the language spoken may frustrate the children. By translating the English utterances into Indonesian, the teachers can help to reduce the negative emotional barriers. This can make the very beginning of English learners feel confidence too, feeling that they are also able to understand the instructions. As Shimizu (2006) pointed out, L1 use can assist children in learning English mainly for affective reasons. With such positive emotions, the L2 learning process will be more effective (Paul, 2003). Gradually, when the L2 utterances have become routines, the children's L2 will be developed.

In addition to that, two year old children are still in the process of acquiring their L1. They are still in the early speech stages (Steinberg, Nagata and Aline, 2001). Introducing new concepts without the use of L1 will probably be difficult. As teacher D noted,

... even when we explain in Indonesian to this children (two years of age), they might be difficult to understand the meaning. It will be even harder when we only explain in English. (My own translation)

Several Purposes for L1 Use

With regard to the purposes, the data shows that the participants used L1 to explain difficult words, to introduce new concepts and instructions, to make sure the students understand the lessons, to discipline and control, to give more detailed advice, to create a teacher-students' bond, and to introduce Indonesian words. Despite the different context of the studies, some purposes bear many similarities to those of Anh's (2010), Zacharias' (2004), Tang's (2002), and Cameron's (2001) findings.

With regard to explaining difficult words in L1, the findings showed that the pre-school teachers also found it necessary to explain difficult words in L1 to the children. This seems to contradict the literature (e.g. Steinberg, Nagata and Aline, 2001; Gordon, 2007) which says that children are able to pick up the L2 words when the words are used in meaningful conversations. However, one has to note that the classroom situation is different from the natural situation. In the classroom, everything is planned and little is spontaneous. Moreover, since there might be many things to cover in one meeting, translation into L1 would be easier and faster than trying to convey the meaning in English (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). These are some instances from the interview,

... for example, when we were having toilet training. We had to train the children to flush the toilet three times. The problem was they didn't know the meaning of the word flush. So I said, 'flush, kita siram tiga kali, three times.' (My own translation)

I think I used Indonesian too often because it was a short cut for me to make the children understand English words. (My own translation)

As two year old children are still in the process of developing their L1, there are some concepts they have not yet acquired. Moreover, they still have limited knowledge about the world (Pinter 2006). With more concrete concepts, teachers could use the children surrounding environments. Actions, gestures, realia and/or pictures can be used to help children comprehend the concepts (Moon, 2004; Pinter, 2006; Gordon, 2007). However, with more abstract concepts, the teachers had to translate them into their L1 (Cole, 1999). These are some of the instances from the interviews.

When one of the children hit his friend, it was hard to explain that the action wasn't good even in Indonesian. The children need times to understand the concepts of good, bad or hurt. English can be used to stop them. "No!" "Stop!" "That's not nice!" But, to give more detailed explanations on the hitting action, Indonesian is needed. (My own translation)

To introduce the concept of rainbow, for example, children still find it difficult. They probably have not seen the rainbow. Another example is when introducing the concepts of waterfall. First, I used

English and then translated that into Indonesian. (My own translation)

In some cases, however, although the teacher has used action or gestured, the L1 is still needed to strengthen the meanings. As Teacher B noted,

When I had to teach them how to rinse their mouth, I started with English. I told them to rinse their mouth. "You have to rinse your mouth" I said that several times. But they still didn't understand. And then I showed them how to do that and said "kumur, kumur, haaahh.. keluarkan airnya." (My translation)

It is well noted that class routines can provide opportunities for language development (Pinter, 2006; Cameron, 2001; Paul, 2003). As the children can hear the same language again and again, they will finally be able to comprehend the meanings (Gordon, 2007). However, one cannot forget the fact that before the utterances become routines, the teachers need to introduce them first. With regard to this, all the participants agreed that to introduce new instructions L1 was needed in order to make the meanings clearer as seen in these following comments:

We can use actions to describe what we are doing in English. However, if the utterance is new to the students, we need to repeat that in Indonesian. (My own translation)

It was difficult at the beginning. The children got confused of what they were instructed to do. So, when introducing new instructions we need Indonesian. For instance, "take your bag!" We can show the children how to do that and said "Take your bag! Nih ambil tasnya!" (My own translation)

As this is the first time the two year old children get exposure to a different language, the teachers want to make sure that all children could understand the message. To do this, they believed that translation into L1 could become their best strategies. This, however, is more on what the teachers feel rather than what the children really need (Cameron, 2001). These are some instances from the interview,

I really want all the children understand my explanation. Actually, I also want them to understand when I'm speaking in English. But, sometimes it is not easy... There are children who can understand me talking in English, but there are others who can't understand it. For those children, I need to translate my words into Indonesian. (My own translation)

Children can understand one or two English words; words that they usually hear. ... Translation into Indonesian is used to make them understand the concepts more. (My own translation)

Managing classrooms is a great challenge when working with two to three year old children. From several studies concerning the use of L1 in TEYL, Cameron (2001) concludes that the L1 is more likely to be used to manage classroom activity and behavior. This is reasonable enough since children have limited span of attention. They need various kinds of activities. To do this, however, the teachers need to be able to discipline the students and control the class. The use of L1, in this case, may underline the importance of what is being said as seen in this following example:

- T : Kakak Angel duduknya dimana? (*Angel, where do you sit?*)
 ...
 T : Miss mau bagi piringnya. (*Miss wants to give you the plate.*)
 : Kalau nda duduk piringnya ndak (*If you don't sit, I won't give you the*
 dibagi. *plate*)

 T : Adek Abraham plate nya dimana? (*Abraham, where is your plate?*)

 : Kakak Angel ndak ajarin adeknya (*Angel, don't teach that to your*
brother.)
 : Adek Abraham duduk sama kakak (*Abraham, sit with your sister.*)
 Angel

The teacher used the word *kakak* (sister) and *adek* (brother) when controlling the children's behavior. These words (*Kakak* and *adek*) are commonly used to call Indonesian children, particularly when the caretakers want to emphasize that one child is older than the other. This often implies that the older one should be the role model to the younger one. As language and culture are related, the use of L1 in this case can help the teacher to reprimand the children.

At the beginning of English learning process, it is important for the teachers to get closer to their students (Gordon, 2007; Cameron, 2001). Although a massive amount of English input is necessary in EFL context, using English at all times will distance the teachers from their students. This might even provide emotional barriers created by fear, tension, boredom, or lack of interest since the teachers appear to be strangers who don't speak the same language as the children do. The use of L1, in this case, can help to create a bond between the teacher and the students. As Teacher A noted,

The children use Indonesian in their daily life. When we use English to approach them, they will not understand what we are saying. Sometimes we need to talk to them personally. When we use Indonesian, we can get closer to them. Doing this, the children can be more opened. They can share their stories. They can share what they want. This is important because we also need information on their learning strategies. (My own translation)

Establishing teacher-students' bond is also necessary in order to treat the children appropriately. As unique creatures, children have different kinds of learning strategies. Preschool teachers, therefore, also need to consider this as Paul (2003) noted. When a positive emotion is connected with a learning experience, the brain seems to send a message that the information is important and that the memory

should retain it. On the other hand, when children are emotionally upset, feel threatened, or have negative emotion, the efficiency of the rational thinking area of the brain seems to decrease, and so learning and retention also decrease (p.179).

Comprehensions Preceding Language Production

In acquiring language, comprehension tends to precede production. If children can't speak English yet, this does not necessarily mean that they can't comprehend the message (Steinberg, Nagata and Aline, 2001; Gordon, 2007). Young children can actually comprehend more than they can produce. In addition, they will speak English when they are ready to do so. During this period, L1 can be of valuable. As Teacher A and B noted,

Sometimes, there is a child who wants to speak English but doesn't know how. He really wants to speak, so he asks me in Indonesian how to say that. ... Children might understand the meaning of 'sit nicely' but they are not able to say it yet. They might wonder whether it is right to say this or that (My own translation)

At the end of the semester, children are normally able to speak simple English sentences. They can say, for example, 'Miss, open please'. When they use Indonesian, we ask them, 'what do you say in English?' They can then produce the English version. (My own translation)

Conclusion

The findings show that pre-school teachers also valued the L1 use in their English classrooms. Instead of seeing the L1 as a hindrance for the children's L2 development, the teachers agreed that L1 could help the children learn the L2 more effectively. Moreover, the roles of L1 and L2 in this particular context became important considerations to help the teachers decide which language to use. Although they realize the needs to expose the children with a massive amount of English input, they cannot forget that the children also need to master the national language. With regard to this, further studies on language policy in early childhood education should be conducted. The findings of such studies will be beneficial to help policy makers develop appropriate English language programs for young learners.

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