

The Reality of Teaching English Without L1 Reference in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Most language teachers continue to debate whether to use students' first language (L1) in the teaching of English. In a typical ESL classroom, the use of L1 is not tolerated hence preventing teachers from permitting language mixing and code-switching in the classroom. In a multilingual context, English is acquired with L1 thus making code switching to have more communicative function as compared to English-only. This research article aims to investigate whether learning the language in isolation (i.e. without reference to L1) enable students to automatically transfer the knowledge to actual communicative acts such as in writing. This paper draws on a syntactic analysis, which looked at students' performance in grammar. Data were taken mainly from students' written production and the findings from the study showed students' tend to acquire grammatical knowledge as merely linguistic property that hinders communicative competence.

Keywords: First language, code-switching, isolation, grammar, communicative competence.

Abstrak

Pada masa kini, dilema penggunaan bahasa Melayu dalam kalangan guru bahasa Inggeris semasa proses pembelajaran dan pengajaran (P&P) masih menjadi persoalan. Secara amnya, proses P&P kelas bahasa Inggeris dilakukan sepenuhnya dalam bahasa Inggeris. Penggunaan bahasa Malaysia adalah tidak digalakkan dan guru bahasa Inggeris tidak membenarkan *code-mixing* dan *code-switching* digunakan di dalam kelas. Oleh hal yang

demikian, kemahiran komunikatif para pelajar dalam bahasa Inggeris menjadi lebih terhad. Sehubungan dengan itu, artikel ini ditulis untuk merungkai persoalan sama ada pembelajaran subjek ini dijalankan sepenuhnya dalam bahasa Inggeris tanpa merujuk kepada bahasa Malaysia membolehkan para pelajar menguasai aspek komunikasi bahasa Inggeris secara bertulis. Data diperoleh melalui tatabahasa dalam penulisan bahasa Inggeris para pelajar yang kemudiannya dianalisis menggunakan analisis sintaktik. Keputusan daripada analisis data menunjukkan bahawa pengetahuan tatabahasa dan kemahiran komunikatif para pelajar dalam bahasa Inggeris adalah terhad.

Kata kunci: Bahasa pertama, *code-switching*, tatabahasa, kemahiran komunikatif.

INTRODUCTION

Although English is not the most widely spoken language in terms of native speakers, it is currently the most widely used language worldwide. The primacy of English in the global arena is attributed to the fact that it is the language through which international trade and diplomacy are conducted, scientific and technological breakthroughs are highlighted, news and information are disseminated, intercultural communication are conducted, and through which social-cultural and socio-economic differences are mediated and negotiated (Crystal, 1997; 2000, Graddol, 1997).

And in a world of instant global connectivity, information is power. A good command of English substantially will lead to empowerment and an improved employment prospects especially in business and organizations with an international orientation. A high level of English enables a high level of academic attainment especially in the field of science and technology. On the other hand, a low level of English will impede one's acquisition of knowledge and limit one's competitiveness in the global market. The hard truth about learning English however is that English is not for everyone. And teaching English to non-native speakers is equally challenging and demanding.

In Malaysia, some of the biggest challenges faced by ESL teachers at the university level are the complains about inadequate preparation of entering undergraduates students to the local university and the concern that students do not possess the level of competency in English to meet the demands made of them. To help encourage the learning of English at university level, the Malaysian Government in 1999 introduced MUET with the hope that students will have another extra two years to hone their English language skills.

To be admitted to a university, applicants must obtain the minimum BAND set by the faculties of each university. MUET became the standardized test to determine whether candidates have an adequate level of English ability to follow undergraduate courses in the chosen field of study. It should also provide some diagnostic information for the remedial English Language course for those candidates whose English ability is not considered adequate for a particular undergraduate program.

Learning English as a second language (L2) without solid foundation of literacy in the first language (L1) can prove to be a daunting task for ESL learners. However in a typical ESL classroom, the use of L1 is not encouraged hence preventing teachers from permitting language mixing and code-switching in the classroom. In a multilingual context, English is acquired with L1 thus making code switching to have more communicative function as compared to English-only. Davies et al (1997, p.57), in their review of literature on “Acquiring Literacy in a Second Language” had quoted the works of Moore (1991) who claimed:

Two crucial and proven facts relating to literacy and bilingualism are ignored. Firstly, achieving and fully developing literacy in their first language is essential to mother tongue maintenance for speakers of languages other than English... secondly, literacy in the mother tongue has been repeatedly shown to support the learning of majority language, in the Australian context, English (Davies et al., 1997, p.57).

This quote by Moore (as cited in Davies et al., 1997) strongly suggests that first language literacy is indeed crucial in learning second language. In another development, Cohen (1995) used a survey given to bilingual and multilingual university students to explore factors influencing language and thought. He found that not only people with access to two or more languages frequently shift between them, but that these shifts can be either unintentional (e.g., thinking in one language is better than another language so the brain automatically shifts language) or intentional (e.g., using another language to help understand the grammar or vocabulary of the target language).

Kern (1994) looked at the role of mental translation as a cognitive strategy in the L2 reading comprehension process using verbal reports interviews. He found that not only his subjects make frequent use of translation as a strategy to understand the L2 text; they also used mental translation in response to specific obstacles of comprehension, such as unfamiliar words and structures. Upton (1997, 1998) in his study on Japanese native speakers studying at U.S. University noted that L2 readers with lower L2 proficiency used their L1 more frequently when (a) wrestling with vocabulary they did not know or were not sure about, (b) seeking to gain a more global understanding of the L2 text, and (c) attempting to summarize or confirm what was understood.

In addition to using L1 mental translation as a cognitive strategy in L2 reading comprehension, it was found that writers with differing L2 proficiency switch from L2 to L1 during their writing process (Wang, 2003). In yet another study conducted by Wang and Wen (2002), it was found that less proficient writers rely on L1 to generate, organize and manage their writing process. A study by Nation (2001) maintained that first language plays an important role in communicating meaning and content.

This research article aims to investigate whether learning the language without reference to L1 enable students to automatically transfer the knowledge to actual communicative acts such as in writing. Specifically this research article hopes to investigate if teaching English in isolation actually helps students produce better essays in terms of syntax.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of whether to teach English in isolation or not is a topic of extensive debate among many language teachers. Some teachers believe that minimum inclusion of first language (L1) in ESL classroom is acceptable while others believe that it should not be allowed at all. In most cases, in a classroom where the learners all share the same L1 or national language, there is a tendency for tasks, which should be done and accomplished in L2 such as group discussion, intensive reading, and preparation for English writing to be done in L1. This is a normal phenomenon besides; it is easier and more communicatively effective for these learners to communicate in L1 rather than communicating and doing tasks in other languages. For shy learners, using L2 can also be terrifying and a source of embarrassment particularly if these individual learners feel that they did not possess the needed proficiency to communicate effectively in English.

While the uses of L2 should be maximized whenever possible, the use of L1 can have very positive effects on learning. Research on L1 and L2 maintains that complete deletion of L1 in the learning of L2 is not appropriate (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nation, 2003). Moreover when used appropriately, the use of L1 in the acquisition of L2 can prove to be helpful and beneficial (Nazary, 2008). Anton & DiCamilla (1998) and Brooks & Donato (1994) for example, found that L1 shared by L2 learners might actually serve as psychological tool in helping L2 learners' analyzed language and work at a higher level than would be possible if they were restricted to the sole use of L2. Kern (1994) argued that "the difficulty in thinking about difficult concepts and ideas in an L2 places an extra load on memory and comprehension processes," which thereby results in L2 readers switching to their L1 to think about what they are reading.

The role of first language (L1) in facilitating (L2) writing

Students' knowledge of L1 conventions affects all areas of L2 writing, including punctuation and orthography (Edelsky, 1982), vocabulary selection and choice of cohesive devices (e.g., Odlin, 1987; Silva, 1993), sentence structure (Leki, 1992), and rhetorical patterns such as different

interpretations of narrative or argumentative structures, genre, audience, or text organization (Connor, 1996; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Panetta, 2001). This can unfortunately lead to students not being able to meet the standard writing form of different genres used in school. Writing involves planning, formulating and revising. For lower proficiency L2 writers, the task of producing content, drafting ideas, revising, choosing appropriate vocabulary and editing task can be a challenging and an overwhelming task. Research shows that low proficiency L2 writers frequently resort to their L1 while text planning, whereas higher proficiency writers are more likely to generate their texts directly in L2 (Wang 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002). Proficient L2 writers however, rely less on L1 to drive their writing process because they have sufficient level of automaticity and knowledge to think and plan in the L2 (Jones & Tetroe, 1987).

During the planning stage writers transform ideas into language. Lexis is one area of cross-linguistic similarity that plays an important role in facilitating L2 writing. Singleton (1999) opined that “the major challenges of learning and using a language whether it be L1 or L2 lies not in the area of broad syntactic principals but in the ‘nitty – gritty’ of the lexicon.” In a similar argument, Hunt and Berger (2005) maintained that, “the heart of language comprehension and use is lexicon.”

In addition to possessing excellent lexical skills, good writers ought also to possess excellent syntactic skills to enable them to understand the grammatical rules use to compose well-structured texts in a written discourse. In other words, writing and grammar are inextricably intertwined as much of good writing derives excellence from faultless grammar (Frodesen & Eyring, 2000).

In the formulation stage, writers are involved in putting ideas to written language structure. Without access into lexical linguistic resources, low proficiency ESL learners will lack automatic accessibility to relevant linguistic knowledge and without access to syntactic rules low proficiency writers lack the knowledge to put words into proper sentences. Without access to wider options of lexical resources semantic processing in L2 might be subjected to fragmentation (Schoonen et al., 2003).

In writing process, revision is also important. During the revision stage writers formed a mental representation of the text that they have produced and attempt to revise and correct it (Hayes, 1996). Without access to a wider range of lexical and syntactic knowledge at their disposal, low proficiency ESL writers will not be able to spot their own errors. In short one can sum up that lexical knowledge and syntactic knowledge are essential components of all stages of writing.

CODE SWITCHING AND CODE MIXING

An important part of the learning process in a multilingual context and society is the ability to do code switching. In a classroom where both the teacher and the students share the same language, code-switching and code mixing are inevitable. Different writers define code switching and code-mixing in many different ways. And some people have difficulty distinguishing between code-switching and code-mixing. Bhatia and Ritchie (2004), for example defined code-mixing as a mixing of various linguistic units (morphemes, words, modifiers, phrases, clauses and sentences) primarily from two participating grammatical systems within a sentence. Code-switching on the other hand is defined as the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent (Poplack, 2000). According to Clyne (2000), code-switching is the alternative use of two languages either within a sentence or between sentences.

In the past, code-mixing and code-switching has been regarded as haphazard as it is thought to impede learning process and progress. More recently, researchers have begun to recognize the important roles of code-switching/code-mixing in facilitating language learning. Code-switching/code-mixing served as a communication strategy to convey linguistic and social information (Grosjean, 1982). In the classroom, code-switching/mixing served as a way into the meaning of the second-language, a short cut to explaining tasks, a way of explaining grammar and etc. That means in a classroom the goal of code-switching is to enable teachers to conduct the course in the target language even if L2 proficiency of students is low. Code-switching in short addresses the tension between the desire

of the teacher to use English executively and the need of the students to understand as much as possible of what is being taught. In a classroom where the use of L1 is prohibited, teachers and students alike lack resources to communicate meaning.

Cook (2001) in his discussion of the relationship between code-switching and language teaching maintained that for many students the ability to go from one language to another is highly desirable; he argued that there is not much point in being multilingual competent if you are restricted by the demands of a single language. According to Cook, teachers should remember that there is nothing wrong with or about code-switching.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCY

The growing concern in Malaysia today is that local graduates do not possess the required communicative competence in English in order to maintain its international competitive edge in all aspects of the economic environment and academic attainment. Almost everyday there are some kinds of reports or references made in the media about the declining standard of English. The question is, if indeed there is a decline in the standard of English, shouldn't it be practical to question the reliability of the current English teaching practices at all levels of education attainment in Malaysia? Perhaps another question that should be taken into consideration might be what is the goal of teaching English as a second language? And how should one define communicative competence?

In this article research, we believe that the goal of teaching English as a second language should be to provide students not only with the ability to master the rules of English but also the ability to transfer the knowledge that they have acquired in class into actual communicative act. For that reason, we adopt Canale and Swain's (1980) definition of communicative competence that is communicative competence is "a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social settings to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can combine according to

principles of discourse.” In addition to that, we believe that communicative competence should entail general knowledge and cultural knowledge of the world.

In an era of active globalization, we believe that it is not appropriate to continue the practice of teaching English in isolation. Language is not only about communicating with words but it includes culture and context. Integrating local context and culture enable the learners to grasp the deeper meaning of the target language and use it effectively and productively (Lengkanawati, 2004).

Surprisingly no studies were conducted (at least that we know) to see if the teaching or learning English in isolation actually enable students to automatically transfer the knowledge to actual communicative acts such as in writing. To this end, this research article aims to investigate whether learning the language in isolation (i.e. without reference to L1) enables students to automatically transfer the knowledge to actual communicative acts such as in writing. Specifically, this research article hopes to investigate if teaching English in isolation actually helps students to produce better essay in terms of syntax.

METHOD

This paper presents a syntactic analysis method which looked at students’ performance in grammar, paying particular attention to the differences between the grammatical structures of students’ L1 and the target language.

Participants

The sample consists of 50 students from 2 grammar classes at the Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa, (PPIB) Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). They are all Malaysian nationals with the majority being Malays aged between 19-21 years old. For these students, their L1 is the Malay language since all of them were educated in Malay since it is the medium of instruction in schools. Prior to attending university, they have studied the English language in primary and secondary schools. These students were selected

based on their level of English language proficiency. Their abilities in reading, writing, listening and speaking were revealed through their scores in the MUET (Malaysian University Entrance Exam). Their MUET results were generally in the range from Band 1 to Band 2, which is considered as having limited proficiency in the language.

Procedure

The samples of written work were collected from the subjects as a selection of a language corpus in this study and were analyzed syntactically. They were asked to write a short paragraph of about 80 to 100 words on the topic “My Favourite Food.” This was done individually as part of their final in-class exercise. They were also given sufficient time (1 hour) to complete the writing task. In addition, no dictionaries or other resources are allowed to be used during the writing process in order to determine the actual proficiency and competence in the target language. The preliminary stage showed samples that contain errors. Students exchanged their essays with other classmates and did peer-editing. They were asked to review and correct errors before submitting their work. The samples were then examined by comparing the students’ sentences with the target language.

RESULT

Detection of L1 Transfer

The types of errors in general that were acknowledged according to their frequency of occurrence and relative significance: the omission of the verb be, literal translation and overuse of the third person –s. These errors in the analysis were largely focused on the errors caused by students’ L1 transfer (Malay) in the use of the English language as their target language (L2). By taking the linguistics differences and similarities of Malay (L1) and English (L2), the sources of the errors were explained and identified. The basic sentence structure for English is: noun phrase + verb phrase.

	Noun Phrase	Verb Phrase
1.	Ali	is a doctor
2.	My sister	is crying
3.	The officer	works downtown
4.	Her house	is by the roadside

On the other hand, in Malay, there are four basic sentence structures i.e. noun phrase + noun phrase, noun phrase + verb phrase, noun phrase + adjective phrase, noun phrase + prepositional phrase.

1.	Noun Phrase + Noun Phrase	2.	Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase
Ali	doktor	Adikku	sedang menangis
<i>Ali</i>	<i>doctor</i>	<i>My sister/brother</i>	<i>is crying</i>

3.	Noun Phrase + Adjective Phrase	4.	Noun Phrase + Prepositional Phrase
Pegawai itu	amat rajin	Rumahnya	di Kampung Baru
<i>The officer</i>	<i>very harworking</i>	<i>His/Her house</i>	<i>in Kampung Baru</i>

Negative Transfer/Avoidance

Based on this study, the obvious negative transfer seen is the wrong usage of the -be verb. In terms of form, the *be* verb is used as an auxiliary form as well as a copula form. Halliday (1994) has described the function of the copula to be or being as a relational process between the subject of a sentence and a predicate (subject complement). A predicate (complement) can either be a noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective phrase or a prepositional phrase. For this study, we shall look at the errors made by students in employing the *be* verb as an auxiliary. The passive voice, tenses such as the progressive, perfect, and the infinitives are formed by the auxiliary *be*. In Malay, it does not have the equivalent auxiliaries of the *be* verb. Unlike the English language, the main verbs in the Malay language are not inflected and not marked for tense. The tense is instead denoted by time adverbs (yesterday) and other tense indicators, for instance ‘already’ and ‘not yet’. Thus, this dissimilar usage of the verb system has led to omission. Ellis (2008) has said that learners will avoid using linguistic structures which they find difficult because of the differences between their native language and the

target language. Therefore, in this study, the effects of L1 are evident not in what learners do (errors) but in what they do not do (omissions). In this study, the auxiliary verb *be* is not employed in the context where *be* should take place. Some of the inappropriate usage of *be* as a result of negative transfer from Malay are listed as below:

1. (Bila) (saya) (makan) (nasi kerabu). [Malay]
When I _____ eating the nasi kerabu.
*When I **am** eating Nasi Kerabu.* (Correct form)
(Bila) (saya) (balik) (ke) (rumah) , (saya) (mesti) (memasak) (lauk) (ini). [Malay]
2. *If I _____ back to my house, I must cook this food.*
*If I **am** back at home, I must cook this food.* (Correct form)
(Mak) (saya) (suka) (masak) (sebab) (dia) (pandai) (memasak). [Malay]
3. *My mother like to cook because she _____ good in cooking.*
*My mother likes to cook because she **is** good in cooking.* (Correct form)
(Mak) (saya) (adalah) (chef yang terbaik) (sebab) (saya) (tidak pandai memasak). [Malay]
4. *My mum _____ the best chef for me because I _____ not good cooking.*
*My mum **is** the best chef for me because I **am** not good in cooking.* (Correct form)
(Tambah) (sedikit) (mayonis) (dan) (siap untuk dimakan). [Malay]
5. *Add some mayonnaise and it _____ ready to eat.*
*Add some mayonnaise and it **is** ready to eat.* (Correct form)

In this study, we would also like to find out the sources or causes found in the errors that are concerned with transfer (Gass & Selinker, 2001). We attempted to find the answer to our question ‘Why did the error occur?’ This ‘source’ therefore identifies the nature of the ‘mismatch’ between L1

and L2 features which happens every time an error occurs in L1 negative transfer. The source is known as ‘literal translation’ from the L1 form. The term implies to errors caused by a process of direct translation, whether they be single words or an entire string of words. Below are the results of ‘literal translation’ from L1:

- (perut) (saya) (berbunyi) (seperti) (musik rock). [Malay]
1. *My stomach sing like music rock.*
*My stomach is **grumbling.*** (Correct form)
(Masakan kegemaran saya) (ialah) (nasi ayam). (Saya) (suka) (makan)
(nasi ayam)

 2. *My favourite food is rice chicken. I like to eat rice chicken di Restoran Razali). [Malay]
in Razali Restaurant.
*My favourite food is **chicken rice.** I like to eat **chicken rice** in Razali Resaturant.* (Correct form)*

 3. (Setiap) (pagi), (saya) (akan) (makan) (nasi lemak). [Malay]
In a single morning, I will eat nasi lemak.
Every morning, I will eat nasi lemak. (Correct form)
(Makanan kegemaran saya) (ialah) (sambal udang). [Malay]
 4. *My favourite food is sauce prawn.*
*My favourite food is **spicy prawn.*** (Correct form)
(Saya) (ingin) (bercakap) (mengenai) (masakan kegemaran saya). [Malay]
 5. *I am want talking about my favourite food.*
***I want to tell** about my favourite food.* (Correct form)

Over-generalization

Studies on error analysis had concluded that L1 transfer could not account for all errors in L2 production. It cannot be predicted based on L1 transfer alone since errors occur in a systematic way for instance over-generalization of a rule. Over-generalization is a common error in first language acquisition as well as in second language acquisition. Therefore, the error is not solely

based on learners L1. Over-generalization happens when a learner forms generalization based on the input they received; that is, they apply linguistic rules they have hypothesized too broadly (Crain & Lilo-Martin, 1999). In this study, students over-generalized the third person singular –s in the context of the first- and second-person pronoun, I. This is probably attributed to the ‘natural order’ of grammatical morphemes proposed by Krashen (1977) that showed L2 learners perform least accurately in plural –s and third person –s. Overuse of the third person –s in the study indicates that the students tried to use their grammar morphemes according to their mental grammar of the target language system, hence results to over-generalization. Most of the overuse third person –s is presented in their sentence construction as follow:

1. *I knows the benefit when I takes the food.*
*I **know** the benefit when I **take** the food. (Correct form)*
2. *I good in cooking so I helps my mum in the kitchen.*
*I **am** good in cooking so I **help** my mum in the kitchen. (Correct form)*
3. *I likes to eat nasi kerabu.*
*I **like** to eat nasi kerabu. (Correct form)*
4. *When I eats nasi lemak, I feels happy.*
*When I **eat** nasi lemak, I **feel** happy. (Correct form)*
5. *If I goes back to my hometown, I sure will eat my favourite food.*
*If I **go** back to my hometown, I will surely eat my favourite food. (Correct form)*

IMPLICATION AND DISCUSSION

This study sheds light to the reality of teaching English in isolation. While this study does not in any way propose that L1 should be used in the learning instruction of English in the ESL classroom, the real question is: What effects outweigh the other? Are the benefits of discouraging the use of the L1 is merited? Or, are the damaging effects for disallowing L1 such as the enforcement of it is truly warranted? Requiring students to use L1 in classroom provides an optimal exposure to and training of L2.

By removing L1 as a means of communication will definitely affect the learning process. How can students possibly experience success if they do not or cannot comprehend the only language of communication used in the class? Rather than taking L1 as interference in L2 learning, teachers should consider systematically integrating L1 into L2 learning. Researchers have suggested several methods of employing L1 into L2 instruction. For example, teachers can teach students to use friendly L1 learning strategies such as code-switching or in translation (Cook, 20001a & 2001b), reinforce L2 language structures using the L1 to explain complex structures (Cook, 2001b) seek clarification through L1 by checking students comprehension and checking for sense (Lucas & Katz, 1994) and engage students as teachers in pairs or group (Cook, 20001a; Lucas & Katz, 1994).

A true comprise on the use of L1 and L2 does not exist in literature. Nonetheless, a complete deletion has been cited to affect students' progress and achievements in reading, writing, speaking, listening and in maintaining and developing relationship. Without the support of one's native language, one will suffer the inability to express and communicate confidently thus rendering the very purpose of L2 acquisition.

Code-mixing/code-switching should be allowed in the teaching of grammar so that students' will be able to transfer the knowledge to actual communicative acts such as in writing. It will benefit the students in the long run and empower them to develop their competency in the target language in a discourse that is more relevant and meaningful.

CONCLUSION

Given the evidence of L1 transfer in students' writing performance, it is a clear indication that English-only classroom does not improve students' proficiency in the target language. No matter how much instruction in L2 they have received in class, they will still employ their L1 schemata in their second language acquisition especially in analyzing grammar. This is evident in the result whereby the manifestation of L1 transfer was significant.

The identification of L1 transfer in the result has also resulted to errors caused by negative transfer/avoidance and overgeneralization. This was proven by comparing students' sentences which are equivalent to the ones translated from their L1. These errors performed by the students showed a hindrance of competency as a result of learning the target language in isolation.

It is the recommendation of this paper that further exploration of the role of L1 in L2 acquisition will provide more explicit and comprehensive guidelines by which instructors may guide their practice. If indeed the findings are empirically sound and support a role for the L1 in L2 acquisition, then it is up to the university to formulate teaching practices that reflect such findings.

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