

BENEFITS OF L1 USE IN ADULTS' EFL CLASSROOM IN ALGERIA

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ABSTRACT

For decades, using the mother tongue (L1) has been a controversial issue in EFL teaching/learning process. Whilst traditional views on FL teaching prescribe the exclusive use of target language (TL) in language classrooms, recent studies recommend that learners' L1 should be treated as a resource rather than a hindrance. Those advocating this idea argue that learners are equipped with a language system already in place from which they draw when learning a new language. Hence, denying such prior knowledge can have detrimental effects on EFL learning success. Learners should be allowed to use their L1 when necessary during classes. A questionnaire was distributed to 20 EFL learners to elicit the reasons for code-switching during English classes. The results showed that using L1 judiciously was beneficial for linguistic functions (explaining grammar rules and new vocabulary) as well as social ones (time-saving, reducing anxiety, developing fluency).

Keywords: L1 use, code-switching, EFL, Adults' learning, Target Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of the mother tongue (L1) in EFL teaching/learning has been an issue of much debate and controversy for decades around the positive and negative effects of L1 during English classes. Proponents of the negative effects of L1 during foreign classes (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002; Nation, 2003; Littlewood & Yu, 2009, etc.) assume that learning should operate in the target language (TL) environment. On the other hand, supporters of the positive effects of L1 (Krashen, 1982; Cook, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Ellis, 2008; etc.) consider that learners apprehend the new language with a prior language experience and that any attempt to reject such learning potential is detrimental for the learning process.

As far as the Algerian context is concerned, English is a far expanding foreign language due to globalization. Whether in public or private education, there is a trend to learning English among almost all age groups for different reasons including education and science; job opportunities; tourism; social media; discovering new cultures; etc. Since the beginning, Algeria has adopted traditional EFL teaching methods based on 'English-only' principle but with the rise of research on the implication of L1 in the process of teaching/learning new possibilities in EFL teaching come into view. Debate on whether learners' L1 should be included or excluded in EFL for adult beginner classes is at an embryonic stage if non-existent at all in the country. EFL teachers often feel they are not doing things right if they have to resort to L1 to be understood. Moreover, they may feel embarrassed or even guilty to transgress the traditional monolingual methods if L1 is used during classes. To overcome this dilemma, it is high time to start investigating such an issue for effective support for the teaching of English that takes the teaching/learning context into account and meets learners' expectations. Thus, it is believed that in the Algerian context, using L1 judiciously could save time, facilitates learning and more importantly avoids the communicative breakdowns. This paper aims to shed light on the

positive role of L1 among adult beginners EFL learning achievements and that an L1-free environment slows down the process of learning for learners who don't have much time to devote to studies. It will also attempt to highlight some of the most important functions of L1 in EFL adults' classes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, the debate on EFL teaching approaches has kept opposing proponents of the monolingual methodology based on 'English-only' principle against those who favour the use of L1 during English classes. The former advocating that L1 use has negative effects on the learning process, while the latter arguing that learners' mother tongue has positive effects on the learning process. Studies such as (Cook, 2001, 2002; Ellis, 2008) support the use of L1 in the SL/FL classroom considering that there is always a mental interconnection between L1 and the target language (TL) and thus, saves time and at the same time shapes their conceptualisation of learning. In the same vein, Eldridge (1996) assumes that no solid arguments are supporting the view that excluding L1 in the classroom will improve learners' efficiency, yet several studies (Atkinson, 1993; Nation, 2003; Norman, 2008) emphasize the fact it should be used according to the classroom context and the learners' needs. On the other hand, other studies have contested the use of L1 assuming that it is a hindrance when learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, teaching English should be done following 'English-only' principle especially when explaining rules of the language or communicating with the learners. For example, McDonald (1993) asserts that the classroom is the only appropriate context where EFL learners are in contact with the TL and that if L1 is used, the exposure to English is reduced. On the other hand, Nation (2003, p. 2), one of the supporters of using L1 maintains that:

There are many reasons for [...] L1 use. Firstly it is more natural to use the L1 with others who have the same L1. Secondly, it is easier and more communicatively effective to use the L1, and thirdly, using the L2 can be a source of embarrassment particularly for shy learners and those who feel they are not very proficient in the L2.

Thus, L1 is considered as a facilitator during English classrooms especially among adult learners for whom its use is helpful to eliminate anxiety and save time. Translation to L1 may be the best alternative (Atkinson, 1987; Brown, 2000; Cook, 2001) instead of wasting time defining and elaborating on the meaning of certain words to help learners. The defenders of 'English-only' principle argue that using exclusively English in the classroom is more beneficial for learners because most of the time it is the only opportunity for English learners to practise and to be exposed to TL and any attempt to use L1 considerably hampers the project. For example, Wong (2010) found that EFL learners in Hong Kong prefer the exclusive usage of English in the classroom because they felt it helped them acquire the new language. The exclusive use of English is envisaged in situations where learners have some linguistic background in the language or when the teacher shares the learners' L1.

Nevertheless, if they have difficulties to understand what is said in English, they may feel frustrated and anxious. Such frustration and anxiety may considerably slow down the learning process. Nunan and Lamb (1996) go even further assuming that avoiding L1 with beginner English learners is almost impossible since it can serve various uses such as language analysis and presenting grammar structures, classroom management, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors, discussing cross-cultural issues, and checking comprehension, Auerbach

(1993). Arguably, L1 is an option that helps them to solve all these difficulties and progress, provided that it will not be a habit that cannot cease. Auerbach (1993, p. 8) assumes that “Starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves.” Adult beginner learners have built a linguistic knowledge and cultural background in L1 which may be useful in facilitating learning English. Moreover, to neglect such an opportunity can be detrimental to EFL learning process. Finally, EFL teaching/learning aims to make learners acquire English by teaching them language skills and some cultural aspects and using judiciously L1 when necessary cannot do any harm in achieving this goal.

The use of L1 in the EFL Classroom appears to be increasing has a positive role. For Auerbach (1993, p. 14) “there is increasing evidence that L1 and/or bilingual options are not only effective but necessary for adult ESL students with limited L1 and schooling backgrounds.” A view that is arguably true for EFL learners too. Brown (2000, p. 129-30) “Often code-switching subconsciously occurs between two advanced learners with a common first language, but in such a case, usually not as a compensatory strategy. Learners in the early stages of acquisition, however, might code-switch-use their native language to fill in missing knowledge-whether the hearer knows that native language or not.” However, using L1 should be used judiciously and when necessary as a supporting tool to reach a satisfactory level of TL command. For example, in their study on EFL learning in Kuwait, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) explained that the use of Arabic (L1) should not be overused; rather it should decrease with the increase of the students' experience with English (TL) in Kuwait.

In the Algerian context, interest in English is amplified by the effect of globalization. Consequently, English learning is widely spread among different ages and in almost all sectors of the society including education, business, mass media, social media, etc. This study is concerned with teaching English to adults. Apart from education and science, the craze of adults to learn English is due to the important place English is taking particularly in business and social media. Most of those adults have a low level of English because for a long time the language was neglected by the authority and the population as well. It is worth mentioning that in Algeria, the status of French as a language of modernity and science has masked the need for another foreign language.

3. METHODS

3.1.1 Context and Participants

This study is conducted at a private language learning institute in Tlemcen, Algeria. A group of 24 adult learners (12 male and 12 female) aged between 25 to 58 years old with low-level English was observed. The participants whose Dialectal Arabic is L1 learnt English as a foreign language for 8 years (in the middle, secondary schools and at university). They wanted to learn English for different reasons: improve their job qualifications; travel abroad; social media or discovering a new culture. The group had two lessons a week that lasted 90 minutes each.

The programme was used to help learners to develop listening and speaking skills. A *Can-do checklist* was used to assess what learners can do at the end of each unit. *Can-do checklist* consists of three columns ‘cannot do it’, ‘can do it’ and ‘50/50’ for new vocabulary, grammar rules, understanding new expressions, understanding written texts, speaking.

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of 25 questions regarding the use of L1. The survey examined the participants’ perception as well as the reasons for using their L1 during the English classes. They were also asked to indicate the extent to which they

agreed or disagreed with the statements on a 4-point Likert scale which ranges from 1=strongly disagree and 4=strongly agree. Data were calculated in terms of the percentage on every statement.

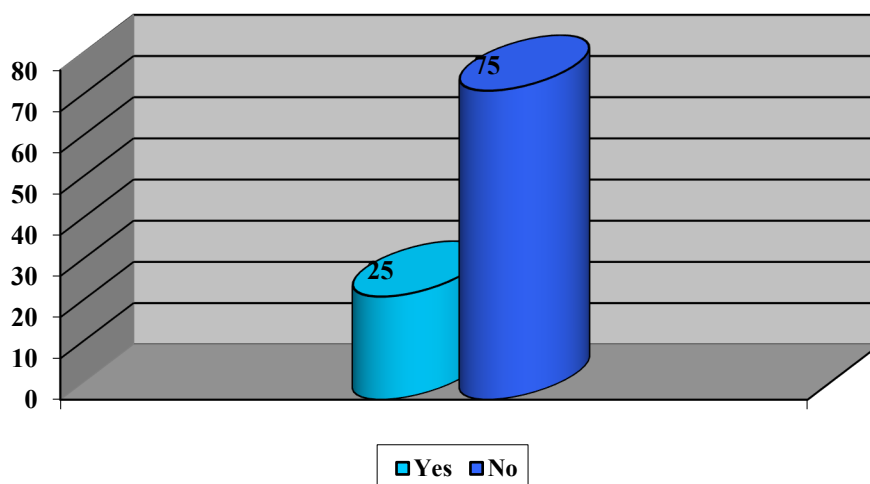
4. Results and Analysis

1. Apart from graduation, did you learn English elsewhere?

The first question aimed to know whether the participants learnt English after graduation. It is important to mention that in Algeria, English is taught from the middle school till university. A complementary question was added to know where the learning took place.

Table 1: Learning English after graduation

Yes	No
6	18
25%	75%



Graph 1: Learning English after graduation

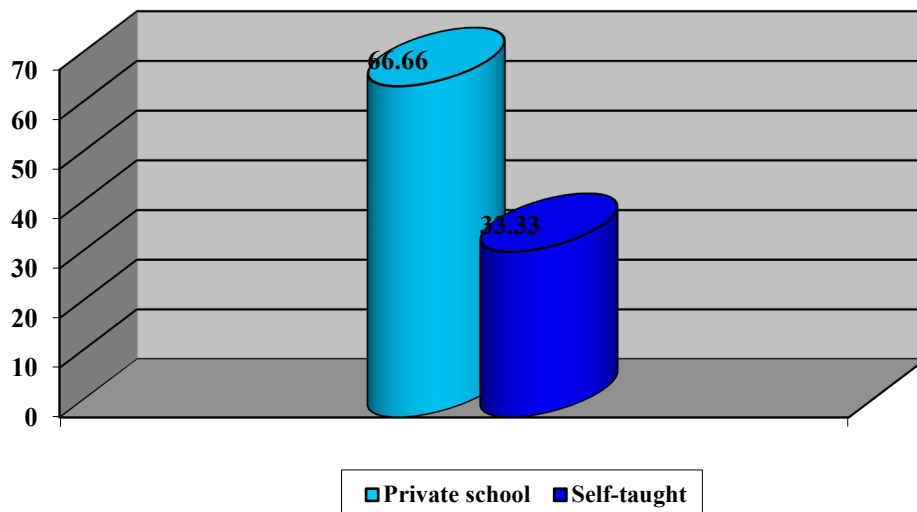
The results showed that there was a large difference in the answers. In fact, 75% of the participants did not learn English after their graduation, while only 25% did. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the informants contented with what they learnt during their school and university.

2. If yes, where?

This question intended to elicit whether English was learnt in private schools self-taught. The informants were given the option to mention any other way they learnt English.

Table 2: Learning environment

Private school	Self-taught	Other
4	2	00
66.66%	33.33%	00%



Graph 2: Learning environment

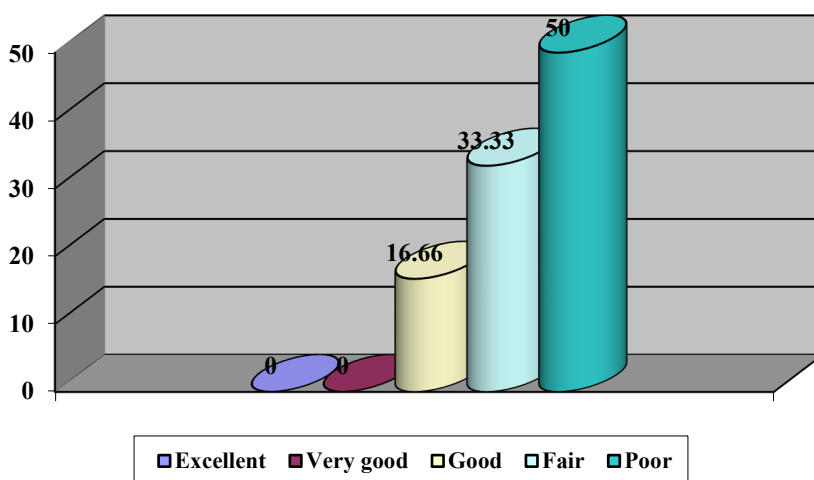
Among the six participants who learnt English after university graduation, four were enrolled in private schools, while two learnt English by themselves. With the flourishing of audio, video methods, podcasts and the numerous apps, learning English became more accessible to almost everyone.

3. What is your level in English?

The third question tried to allow learners to assess their level in English.

Table 3: Self-assessment of the level in English by the learners

Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor
00	00	4	8	12
00%	00%	16.66%	33.33%	50%



Graph 3: Self-assessment of the level in English by the learners

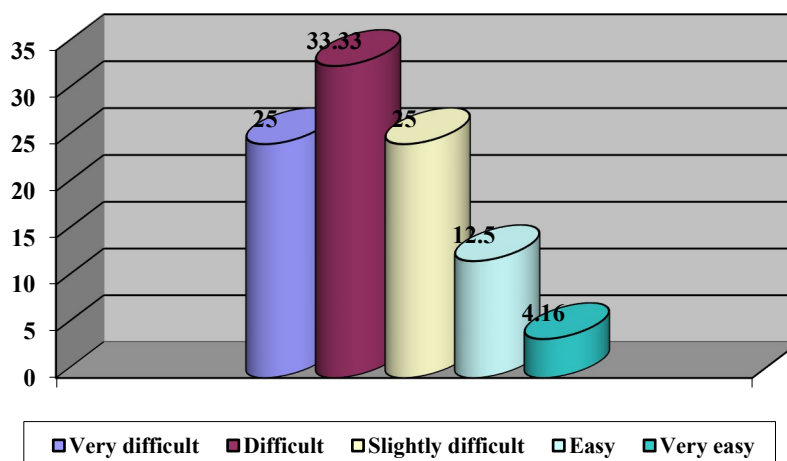
None of the informants believed to be excellent or very good at English. Half of the participants (50%) think they have a poor level in English, while 33.33% reported their level is fair and only 16.66% felt they are good. Sometimes learners underestimate their level in English.

4. How did you consider English during your studies?

The fourth question aimed at bringing out the perception of the learners regarding the degree of difficulty or easiness of learning English during their studies.

Table 4: Perception of the learners regarding the difficulty of learning English

Very difficult	Difficult	Slightly difficult	Easy	Very easy
6	8	6	3	1
25%	33.33%	25%	12,5%	4,16%



Graph 4: Perception of the learners regarding the difficulty of learning English

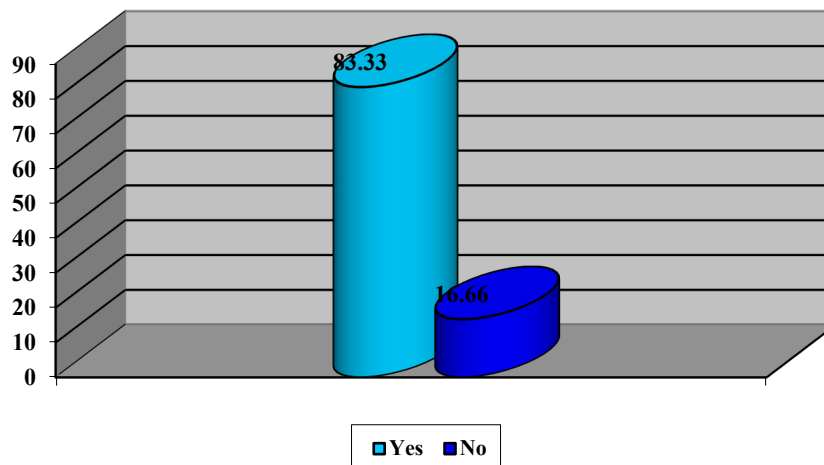
The results showed that the views are varied. For eight participants (33.33%), learning English was 'difficult', while 'very difficult' and 'slightly difficult' for six (25%) respectively. During their studies, 3 learners (12.5%) considered that learning English was 'easy' and only 1 (4.16) declared it was 'very easy'. The perception depends on the learning environment and the learners themselves. It should also be noted that these opinions reflect distant memories.

5. Do you like your teacher to use Dialectal Arabic in class?

The fifth question was intended to see whether learners like their teacher to use Dialectal Arabic in class or not.

Table 5: Students' attitudes towards the use of L1 by the teacher

Yes	No
20	4
83,33%	16,66%



Graph 5: Students' attitudes towards the use of L1 by the teacher

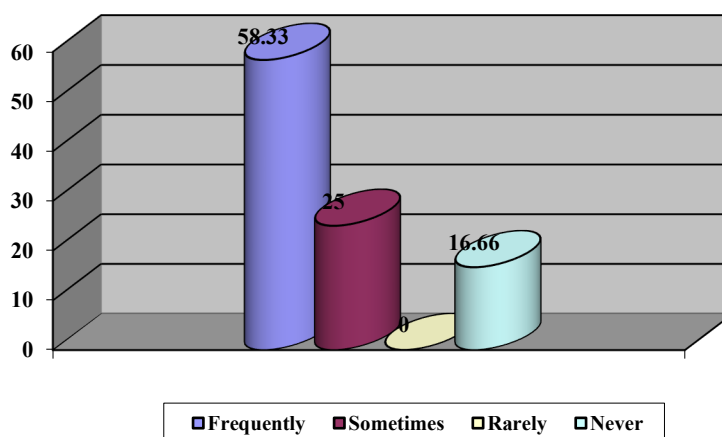
The majority (83.33%) of the participants felt that L1 should be used by the teacher during classes, while 16.66% were against. Those in favour of using L1 thought it is helpful.

6. How often Dialectal Arabic should be used in the English class?

The sixth question is complementary to the first one. It aimed to evaluate the rate of recurrence of L1 use in the English class through different possibilities.

Table 6: Frequency of L1 use during English class

Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
14	6	0	4
58.33%	25%	00%	16,66%



Graph 6: Frequency of L1 use during English class

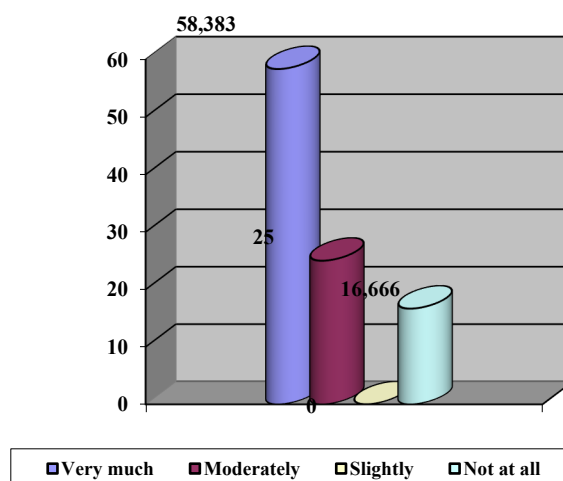
The findings match the first results (see table 1). Apart from 16.66% of the participants against using L1, none of the informants believed English should 'rarely' be used; the majority was in favour of using L1 but to different degrees. Whereas 58.33% of the informants consider that L1 should be used 'frequently', 25% believe it should 'sometimes' be used.

7. Do you believe using Dialectal Arabic during class helps you learn English?

The seventh question tried to find out the learners' feeling about whether using L1 during English classes is helpful or not.

Table 7: Learners’ attitudes towards L1 during English class

Very much	Moderately	Slightly	Not at all
14	6	0	4
58.33%	25%	00%	16,66%



Graph 7: Learners’ attitudes towards L1 during English class

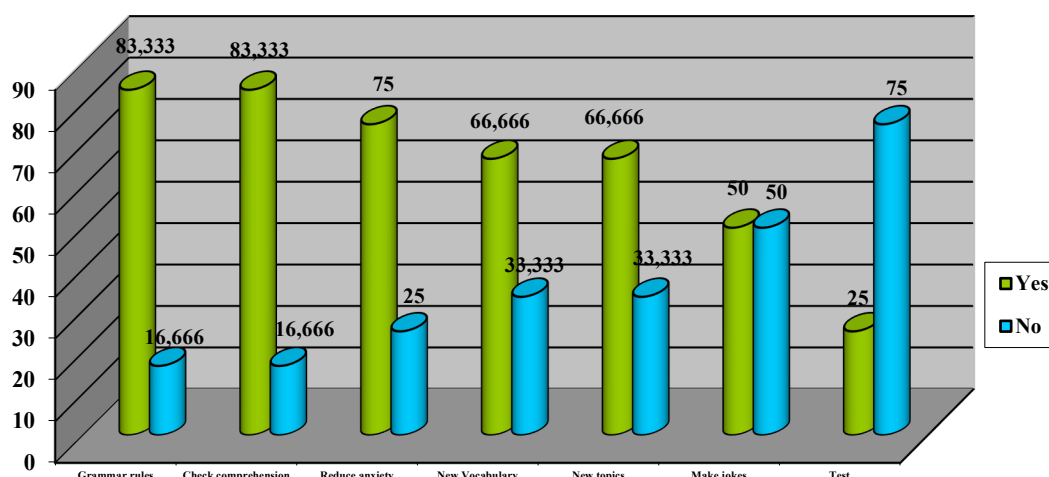
Findings revealed that 58.33% believe that the use of DA helps to learn English and 25% think that it moderately helps. On the other hand, none of the informants declared the use of L1 slightly helps. Finally, 16.66% stated that L1 is not helpful at all. Results seem to corroborate those of table 6.

8. When is it appropriate to use Arabic in the English class?

The last question tried to look at tasks where the use of L1 is appropriate.

Table 8: Tasks where the use of L1 is appropriate

Use of the mother tongue (L1)	Yes		No	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
To explain grammar rules	20	83,33%	4	16,66
To check for comprehension	20	83,33%	4	16,66
To reduce students’ anxiety	18	75%	6	25%
To explain new vocabulary	16	66,66%	8	33,33%
To introduce new topics	16	66,66%	8	33,33%
To make jokes	12	50%	12	50%
To test	6	25%	18	75%



Graph 8: Tasks where the use of L1 is appropriate

While only 16.66% are against, the majority (83.33%) of the participants considered that 'explaining grammar rules' and 'checking for comprehension' were the most important tasks where L1 is appropriate to be used. Scores also showed that for 75% the use of their mother tongue 'reduces anxiety' and 'relaxes atmosphere in the classroom', while 25% are not convinced it does. Using L1 for testing received a low rate. Clearly, 75% of the learners were against using L1 for testing and only 25% are in favour. Two other tasks share the same scores. The results also showed that 66.66% of the participants considered that using L1 is appropriate for 'introducing new vocabulary' and 'new topics'. Finally, using L1 'to make a joke' receives tied scores (50% each).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Importance of English

In general terms, it seems that the importance of English in the Algerian context is relatively recent. Most of the participants showed little importance to English during their studies. The small number of those who learnt English either in private schools or by themselves is indicative of the status of English in Algeria in the past. In fact, it reflects a general tendency that before the last two decades, there was no great enthusiasm towards learning English because it was neither important in professional nor in the social life of almost all Algerians.

French was the superimposed foreign language used for international communication and trade. However, with sociopolitical changes fostered by globalization, the country notices a growing interest in English which has become more important than ever among the different sectors of the population. The flourishing number of private schools teaching the language is standing proof. Consequently, there is an increasing demand to learn English for several reasons including job requirements, education, science, tourism, social media, etc.

5.2 For or against L1

Most of the participants were in favour of using L1. The high rate for the use of L1 may be explained by the fact that adults, lacking time, want to progress rapidly and efficiently. Using L1 helped to unlock difficult situations related to comprehension of whatever kind it was (new vocabulary, explaining grammar rules, etc). Those having a poor level in English (83.33%) were favourable to the use of L1. There is an exponential relationship between the learners'

level of English and the recourse to the use of L1. The more the learners' level in English was good, the more they were against the use of the mother tongue.

5.3 When to use L1

Most of the participants (83.33%) believed that L1 is at different degrees helpful to learn English while more than the half of them (58.33%) declared it is very much helpful and 25% said it is moderately helpful. In general, the significant use of L1 may be explained by the fact that most adult learners are willing to gain time. Thus, using only English may slow down their progression.

The appropriate use of L1 is a strategy that validates the learner's lived experiences Auerbach (1993) and permits the learners to draw on their previous resources and experiences to build up new knowledge and learn the new language. Cromley (2000, p. IV) goes even further saying "It is impossible to remember without associating new information with what you already know".

Data analysis revealed that learners' L1 is appropriate to serve a variety of functions. Among the proposed tasks, the highest ones where L1 is used are 'explaining grammar rules' and 'checking comprehension' both respectively scoring 83.33% while 'testing' is the task where L1 is lowest used. For example, to understand a grammar rule, using L1 to simplify or find an analogy with L1 may save time and assure the assimilation of the rule. Similarly, learning new vocabulary may be better done through associating the FL word form which is easily and directly related to its L1 word equivalent which in turn, facilitates the comprehension when it is difficult to do it using only English. In this sense, English can be learnt through raising awareness of the similarities and differences between L1 and TL to foster students' comprehension. Lado (1957, p. 2) argues that "the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult." He adds that "Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture" (Lado, 1957, p. 2). If L1 is seen as helpful in all the tasks that have a relationship with comprehending the language, testing remains substantially envisaged in TL to check for the learning improvement curve.

Interestingly, when making jokes, views are divided (50/50%). Half of the participants said that humour is better done in TL, while the same number declared it is better done in L1. Seemingly, the division of views reveals that there is not a major stake using L1 or TL. It remains that using humour can enhance the learning process by reducing anxiety and relaxing the classroom's atmosphere.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this research, it seems obvious that the use of L1 in the EFL classroom for adult beginners is helpful. Findings are in line with the theories that advocate the positive effects of the use of L1 when learning a foreign language. The use of L1, at least in low levels has a positive impact in the FL classroom especially among adults who are mostly lacking time and who can benefit from lived experiences in L1. To ignore learners' L1 which represents their linguistic and cultural background may have a negative influence on the FL learning process. In this case and contrary to the traditional views, the learner's L1 should be considered a resource rather than a hindrance when learning English.

At last, as successful learning depends on different pedagogical tasks, it is important to explore the factors that enhance EFL learning outcomes. Using L1 judiciously makes English more accessible to adult beginner learners. Though the role of L1 in EFL classes has always been a complex and controversial issue, it has become evident that there is a pressing need for rethinking EFL teaching/learning by moving away from traditional methods and taking into account the bi/multilingual norms and the galloping globalization.

7. REFERENCES

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