

Towards a Systematic Inclusion of Translation-based Exercises in Beginners' L2 Reading Comprehension Classes

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Abstract

A possible judicious use of L1 in EFL teaching has recently been approved on the grounds that students' first language cannot be totally banned for it can still provide help in FL teaching and learning. However, little has been suggested as to how to reinvest L1 in a reasonable pedagogical manner which guarantees students' exposure to the target language and benefits the learning process. In this paper, a methodological model, wherein a limited number of short L1-related exercises are mixed with common comprehension activities in L2-reading comprehension classes of beginners, is proposed. To examine the effectiveness of this systematic strategy, 63 beginners of FL learning in middle schools were exposed to translation-related exercises in the three phases of the reading comprehension lesson. To gather data, 13 classes of qualitative observation were carried out in which a checklist was used. Then, the collected data was analyzed thematically. Results showed that including translation-related exercises in L2 reading classes in a controlled systematic manner was a source of motivation, increased self-confidence and performance improvement for beginners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Controversially, the use of L1 in FL classes has always been at the heart of debating. Between the opponents of resorting to L1 and proponents of making use of students' mother tongue in learning a foreign language, many points of argument continue to exist. Such a heated ongoing controversy of defending a possible methodological introduction of students' mother language or banning it in L2 contexts has always brought about opposing views instead of reaching a consensus on a shared ground in light of which some room can be saved for L1 in foreign language teaching methodology. Such a situation of contradicting views shows that the topic is still worth researching though it may seem that L1 is generally depicted in the literature as a teaching tool to be avoided.

For many years, both sides of the controversy have academically generated and defended their differing standpoints towards the use of L1 in L2 teaching. On the one hand, a stance of marginalization towards L1, which later developed into a decision of total banning of L1, is still dominant in our days, especially in foreign language teaching contexts where

monolingual language policies are enforced. On the other hand, a recent wave of research in the field of "FL" teaching methodology as well as bilingual education has shed light on the impracticality of banning all forms of students' mother tongue in "FL" classes. Instead, a need to seek some strategic practices for the sake of readopting students' first language judiciously in "FLT" has lately been voiced by the strong belief that the use of L1 can be a source of help for teachers and learners.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1.A Stance of the Total Refusal

The use of L1 in the teaching of foreign languages has been subject to criticism which has been based on various reasons. Scholars in the field of FL teaching methodology, including Duff (1989); Eadie (1999) and Ulrych (1986) have strongly suggested banning L1. Additionally, such a common attitude of objection against students' mother tongue has strongly been advocated by the principles of the monolingual methods of foreign language teaching (Brown, 2007). More specifically, rejecting L1 stemmed from the doctrines of Communicative Language Teaching (Hymes, 1972) which all characterized the reform movement to foreign language teaching methodology (Hall and Cook, 2012).

Defending the ineffectiveness of using L1/translation in EFL teaching, Carreres (2006) claims that L1 is detrimental to foreign language learners in FL contexts because it stops them from expressing themselves freely in L2. In line with this, Phillipson (2014) argues that L1 should be banned believing that "including the mother tongue [is] a hindrance in foreign language learning" (p. 187). In her point of view, Swift (2006) contends that L1 should not be used in class claiming that L2 has to be the prevailing medium of instruction in FL classes. Doing this, class time will be spent effectively in foreign language classes because it is precious for FL learners as argued by Swift (2006). Putting more emphasis on this point, the same researcher sees that L2 class time should not be wasted on L1 believing that the more foreign language learners are exposed to L2, the better their proficiency in that language will be. Such an attitude against L1 is validated by Hall and Cook (2012) who argue that by providing a total immersion of learners in L2, real-life situations can be closely inspired for them to use L2.

More on this point is provided by Hall and Cook (2012) who strongly believe that "new languages are better learnt monolingually, without the use of students' language" (p. 271). Thus, banning L1 is seen to guarantee learners' maximum exposure to the target language. Not very differently, other scholars in the field of FL teaching criticize resorting to translation in class based on the idea that it will naturally reduce students' exposure to L2 (Dujmovic, 2007). In connection with this, Pavón and Ramos (2019) argue that in EFL contexts wherein L2 is not used idealistically, due to a shortage in exposure or limited use or because of using L1, the development of L2 is likely to be hindered.

2.2.Tolerating L1 in EFL Teaching

The controversial claim of separating L1 from L2 to avoid the former in foreign language teaching has recently been assessed and re-examined to find out the extent to which L1 can still have a room in EFL methodology. Recent works of noticeable scholars in this area of research provide interesting ideas. Deller and Rinvoluceri (2008) are strongly against the idea of avoiding learners' first language because they believe that "the mother tongue is the womb from which the second language is born" (p. 4). Based on these words, a very close interconnection is believed to exist between the two languages meaning that L1 is the source for a second language to exist as argued by the two

scholars above. Accordingly, it seems totally impractical to exclude learners' L1 in FL classrooms.

In the context of recent studies advocating the use of L1 in FL teaching and learning, Widdowson (2003) remains one of the scholars whose works have provided an insightful vision. Practically, the latter considers foreign language learning as a bilingual process stressing the fact that all foreign language learners, while seeking to learn another language, attend classes with one language at least (Widdowson, 2003). In connection with such a claim, the same scholar describes teachers' job in FL contexts as the mission of making "the first language (L1) and the foreign language (L2) [have] contact in our learners" (p. 149). This implies that making use of L1 while teaching L2 should be seriously considered.

The above-mentioned instances of previous research about the importance of L1 and the rising interest in reintroducing it in FL classes are strikingly supported by the results of more recent studies which have generally and specifically continued to pinpoint the necessity of benefitting from L1 in foreign language classes. More recent research focusing on the same topic showed a negative stance towards the notion of separating L1 and L2 which is believed to be founded on the monolingual ideologies (Maphalala and Mpofu, 2020; Almusharraf, 2021). On the other hand, the necessity of recognizing the importance of L1 and integrating it in FL classes has recently been called for (Ambele and Watson Todd, 2021). It has also been strongly argued that L1 can be a resource and that students' L1 repertoire can be invested in many ways to potentially support learning (Ambele, 2020). In this sense, it is claimed by Pavón and Ramos (2019) that the use of L1 in bilingual contexts can be a logical strong tool, especially for scaffolding content. Emphasizing the benefit of investing L1, the latter believe that L1 allows having access to the type of knowledge in which the use of L2 does not prove to be helpful (Pavón and Ramos, 2019).

In the same regard, Wei (2018) sees that learners often employ their entire linguistic repertoire including that of L1 to build comprehension. Likewise, Garcia and Otheguy (2020) contend that students improve their L2 learning when they are allowed to use their L1 strategically. In the same line, it is believed that depriving students of L1 use in FL classes makes them, especially those with very weak linguistic abilities or beginners feel powerless and unmotivated (Littlewood and Yu, 2011). In line with the previous claim, it has recently been found that the use of L1 will facilitate comprehension of new concepts and L2 content along with helping learners in completing tasks and retaining new content (Maphalala and Mpofu, 2020; Almusharraf, 2021).

Similarly, Boonsuk et al., (2021) argue that L1 is a natural pedagogical strategy which should have a room in FL teaching methodology. Lo (2016) also reports that "more scholars now believe that translation should not be deliberately excluded from [FL] classrooms and advocate the use of translation as a language learning activity" (p. 16). The same researcher further stresses the need for finding room for translation in FL learning stating that "many language activities can be presented as translation tasks for teaching purpose and a variety of translation tasks designed together with some form of treatment/training to help L2 learners make progress have been proposed in a number of publications" (Lo, 2016, p. 19).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1.Objectives

Generally, this paper sheds light on the use of students' mother tongue in the form of translation-based exercises in EFL classes. It intends to investigate the effectiveness of incorporating L1-related exercises in EFL teaching by capturing beginners' reactions towards

incorporating such exercises in reading comprehension classes. Innovatively, the present paper specifically seeks to show that a reconsideration of students' L1 has to be taken into account by suggesting the inclusion of translation-related exercises in the three phases of the reading comprehension lesson. To attain the objectives of the present paper, a major research question was postulated. The question was:

- How can L1-related exercises be included in L2 reading comprehension in a systematically controlled manner?

3.2.Context and Participants

The present paper casts light on the topic of L1 use in EFL teaching in Morocco. Officially, teachers of English in middle and high schools, where English is taught as a second foreign language, are supposed not to resort to using Arabic no matter what the reasons are. This stance of total rejection is justified by the adoption of a monolingual language policy. Such a methodology might apply to teaching English in high schools. However, it may be impractical to completely ban all forms of L1 with lower-level classes wherein learners are characterized by having a shortage or lack of linguistic knowledge in L2. This knowledge is likely to ease the task of learning a language which is totally new to students, especially in the reading skill provided that it is a language component which may pose problems to learning a foreign language L2 beginners (Ling, 2011). To carry out this research, 63 students were randomly selected to take translation-related exercises in reading comprehension lessons. This sample population was homogeneous in the sense that all the students were all zero beginners. That is, they were middle school students who were supposed to study English for the first time. This population is representative of students in middle schools because they have the same textbook and take a two-hour English class per week in all middle schools in Morocco.

3.3.Data Gathering Instrument

To conduct this research, a methodological practical framework which suggests including translation exercises in the three phases of the reading comprehension lesson was adopted. Meanwhile, learners' reactions were observed. To this end, the 63 students who formed two classes were divided into four groups consisting of a maximum total of 15 students out of respect for the circumstances dictated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In total, 13 classes of reading comprehension were devoted to observations. For observational purposes, short L1-based exercises were incorporated in the pre-, while and post-reading stages of the lessons. The translation tasks were short in that they did not exceed 5 minutes in the pre and during-reading stages while they reached a maximum of 10 minutes for the post-reading phase. To gather data, a checklist was devised for each class of observation. It contained 12 rubrics of observation. For data analysis, the observation rubrics were thematically analyzed. Consequently, out of the 12 aspects of observation, secondary then major codes were obtained. Later, final themes were generated (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Providing a variety of translation-related exercises in the 13 classes of reading comprehension intended for observation, 12 aspects of observation were specified to gather information necessary to answer the research question postulated. The observation process mainly focused on capturing students' overall reactions towards the process of incorporating L1-related exercises with other traditional in-class reading comprehension activities.

For the sake of observing students doing translation exercises in the three phases of the reading lesson, translation exercises were intentionally made short and controlled in the sense

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that they did not take much time so that they could be mixed with traditional reading comprehension tasks. During all the observation sessions, only two translation-related exercises were included in each stage. Pre-reading L1-related exercises required the students to match, tick, circle or cross out. Following the instructions, L1 was allowed on the part of learners only when giving their answers to save their L2 learning time. The following are examples of translation-related tasks which students were assigned before reading the text:

- *Guess then match the words to their translations.*
- *Circle the correct English words for the Arabic ones.*
- *Give the English words for these words.*
- *How do you say these words/phrases in your language?*

With the same intention of having control on the process of providing translation exercises to be done during the while-reading stage, beginners were invited to skim the text, read for specific information, scan the text for specific words and infer meaning. Examples of L1-related while-reading activities included:

- *Read the text to find the translation of the following words.*
- *Read then match the sentences to their translations in the text.*
- *Read the text to tick the best translation of each sentence in the text.*
- *Find in the text the opposites of these words in English.*

The process of incorporating translation-based exercises in the post-reading stage was done to offer another chance for students to achieve further or complete understanding of the text. Examples of such exercises were:

- *Read carefully then put the translation of the text in the correct order.*
- *Choose the best translation of the first paragraph of the text.*
- *Translate the second paragraph into your language.*
- *Complete the translation of the text with the right words.*
- *Check the translation of these sentences from the text.*

Applying thematic analysis method, the collected data was analyzed. The remarks gathered through the checklist were read and re-read for generating initial codes. Then, subthemes were generated and finally three major themes were obtained. Table 1 below displays the results of thematically analyzing the remarks obtained during the observation period.

Table 1
Themes obtained from class observation remarks.

Observation aspects category	Theme generated
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students show interest in doing translation exercises.• Students are motivated to do reading comprehension translation exercises.• Students are enthusiastic to share their answers with class.	Motivation

-
- Use of L1 encourages and motivates students to perform better in reading comprehension class.
 - Students show confidence while doing translation exercises.
 - Students use their friends' help to do the exercises.
 - Students resort to their classmates to understand the instructions. Self-confidence
 - Students ask for the teacher's help while doing the exercises.

 - Students participate in the lesson.
 - Students are engaged in correcting translation exercises.
 - Students do better in other comprehension exercises. Participation/Performance
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Note. This table shows the results/themes obtained from class observation notes' analysis.

As shown in Table 1 above, the aspects which constituted the areas of class observations were thematically combined. This analytical step was implemented to generate major themes. As a result, three major themes were obtained, namely *motivation*, *self-confidence* and *participation/performance*. The three themes are believed to help provide indications and conclusions which can provide answers to the research question postulated.

4.1.Motivation

As a first major theme, it was witnessed during the observation classes that students showed a strong level of *motivation*. It was notable that they were strongly interested in doing the translation-related exercises which were included in the reading comprehension classes. Students' motivation was remarked through their readiness to share their answers with the whole class. Besides, a strong feeling of encouragement was interestingly noted while and after doing the translation exercises suggested. That is, beginners were observed to be encouraged to do translation-related exercises as well as the other reading comprehension tasks which were assigned in the same classes including True/False exercises, answering WH/Yes-No questions and finding referents in the text.

Such a positive attitude on the part of the students was strongly reflected in their high level of enthusiasm while correcting the translation-related tasks which were allotted. In other words, the young learners were observed to be enthusiastic in doing and sharing their productions with the whole class. Proud to share their answers, they provided their versions the things which is consistent with Nolasco and Arthur (1995) who suggest that translation exercises can create desire for communication and encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas. This type of motivating attitude can be also due to a decreased feeling of anxiety in beginners thanks to making use of L1 through investing translation exercises in classes (Lewis, 2009).

4.2.Self-confidence

The second class observation-related theme was labelled *self-confidence*. Throughout the observation sessions, it was noticed that the level of students' self-confidence while doing

translation-related activities along with other exercises assigned for comprehension was quite high. Interestingly, it was observed that they rarely asked for the teacher's guidance while doing their tasks. Statistically, 57 out of the 63 students showed enough self-confidence in the sense that they hardly resorted to their friends for help so that they could do their tasks or understand the instructions of the reading comprehension activities.

Such observed aspect of self-confidence while including translation exercises is in line with Buckmaster (2000), Najduchowski (2008) and Swift (2006) who all argue that the use of translation might take out the fear of learning and make students less tense. Decreasing students' fear towards foreign language learning along with making them feel less worried, as concluded from the afore-mentioned assertions, makes translation exercises constitute a methodological strategy which is likely to boost students' feeling of confidence (Prince, 1996) and generally has a positive impact on students' performance with reading material.

More support for this can be found in the claim that the use of translation in the beginning stages of learning could enhance learners' confidence by decreasing their burden in learning a second language (Baddely, 1990; Husain, 1995). Hence, translation exercises in reading comprehension classes could prove to be beneficial for fostering young learners' level of confidence and therefore improve their class performance (Husain, 1995). The same is argued by Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) who see that translation is the best pedagogical source for building learners' self-confidence. In light of this, the inclusion of L1 seems to be an unavoidable component of FL teaching methodology with beginners. That is a pedagogical strategy which can facilitate learning and is likely to make students perform better.

4.3. Participation/Performance

Analysing the class observation notes, a third theme was generated under the label *participation/performance*. In this sense, it was observed that in all the sessions, wherein students were under observation, the young learners' participation was strong. Students were actively involved in all the classes. Also, it was clearly noted that the young students were enthusiastically engaged during the correction of the activities where they had the chance to share their productions with the whole class and comment on their classmates' answers. Moreover, it was remarked that the performance of 54 out of the 63 students was not only good regarding translation-related exercises but also while doing the other reading comprehension in-class assignments.

In parallel with such a class observation finding, Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) suggest that translation can positively affect learners' performance because it is regarded as the greatest pedagogical resource which can enhance learners' self-confidence and focus on meaning. In agreement with this idea, Husain (1995) contends that translation can be beneficial for learners' performance. In a study he carried out on translation used in the teaching of the four skills, he found that translation could intensify learners' confidence and give them a positive feeling of relaxation (Husain, 1995) which, in turn, makes them feel confident enough to perform better. More corroboration for such a perception of regarding translation exercises as a means to improve learners' performance in reading comprehension can be inferred from Danchev's (1983) view. The researcher sees that translation activities not only play a role in solving language complications for the learners, but they also help students perform well by providing effective comprehension of the reading material (Danchev, 1983).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate a new framework for incorporating L1 in EFL classes. It was found that limited use of short controlled translation-related exercises in beginners' reading comprehension lessons as a new way of pedagogically introducing students' mother tongue in EFL teaching can be beneficial for beginners when systematically done. When carefully used and purposefully mixed with other reading comprehension tasks, L1-related exercises were found to boost students' motivation in reading classes, strengthen their self-confidence and improve their overall performance in the pre-, while and post-reading stages of the lesson. However, as in the case of any other research, this paper has shown common limitations of participants. Despite these, the present research could be regarded as a promising starting point for future research which can deeply examine more innovative ways of practically reintroducing students' first language in foreign language classes.

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