Exploring Teachers Perceptions of L1 Use in the English Language Classroom at Language Schools in Istanbul

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Abstract: **There have been numerous professional discussions on whether or not to adopt the use of learners' own language in English language classes for best learning results since the spread of English as a primary language in various domains worldwide. Yet, lately, this hypothesis about using only English in class has been gradually investigated, and the use of own-language is still being examined. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on L1 use practices from the perspectives of teachers. The sample consists of one hundred and three English teachers in Istanbul in Turkey. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the main methods used to collect quantitative and qualitative data on the research questions. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents agree with using L1 in language teaching and learning. Gender, age, qualifications, types of schools show some associations with the use and attitudes towards L1. Female, novice, graduated teachers in the public sector show more inclination towards the use of their own language as revealed by the one-way analysis of variance and the chi-square tests. The findings of the current study suggest that L1 use practices occupy a larger space in English curricula.**

Keywords: **attitude, perceptions, own-language use, L2 maximisation, primary language.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Language has always been the main method of human communication. So, people have sought to learn foreign languages for a variety of purposes throughout history. Several languages like Latin, Greek, and then French and Italian have received more attention since the 16th century due to political changes in Europe. Alongside the technological developments, industry, and commerce, English has quickly spread and become popular in the world, eventually becoming the primary means of communication in global contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As a result, efforts to figure out the best way to teach English have begun, resulting in the creation of several language teaching methodologies, each with its own set of rules.

In the world of language pedagogy, there is a debate about including or excluding the first language (L1) use in a second language (L2) classroom. Consequently, many studies have tended to elaborate on this issue, e.g., the reduction of using the learners' mother tongue in some teaching methods and adopting the TL only. As a result, previous studies shed light on the monolingual approach to language learning which not only emphasised the use of target language (TL) but also prohibited the learners' native language (L1). So, the monolingual approach states that the classroom instructions should only be given in the target language. Supporters of an approach that states English as the only means in learning and teaching

think that L2 should be used exclusively in class, and they oppose the practice of the students' L1 in favour of foreign language exposure and advocate for widespread usage of L2 (Turnbull, 2001).

Depending on the L2 as the ultimate means of teaching and communication among the teacher and the students has become a trend in ELT. While many teachers working in this field are trying to adopt this approach, others are still doubting its validity based on previous researchers' viewpoints. In this case, the monolingual approach in English language teaching has been criticised for many reasons. First, it is impractical because of the large number of non-native teachers. Second, native teachers are not always the most competent, and by using only English in the class, the learners' ability to speak will be diminished. Third, only listening to the teacher is insufficient because there could be other constituents that affect the process of learning a new language (Miles, 2004). Likewise, monolingual teaching may make an unpleasant atmosphere in the classroom and build an obstacle, along with the incorrect times that it could be used in, Patchler and Field (2001). Thus, when a certain aspect of the lesson is ambiguous, the L1 can be used to transcend this obstacle and reduce the students' tension.

In contrast, using L1 in L2 schoolrooms has also gained a wide range of support from researchers throughout history. Accordingly, L1 was and is still used in many classrooms all over the world especially for the lower levels. Atkinson (1987) has emphasised that the entire avoidance of the students' own language in class is "unfashionable". In other words, while teachers continue supporting the use of English alone in class, an increasing number of methodologists and trainers recognise the potential advantages of utilising the students' native language in class, as Harmer (2007) has affirmed. Also, Patchler and Field (2001) have also supported the notion that insisting on the persistent usage of L2 might lead to poor performance on the part of both teachers and students, and it generates a kind of tension among them; therefore, by using the students' L1, this tension will be minimised and the barriers among them may be eliminated.

According to the history of English language teaching methodologies, switching between L1 and L2 in the classrooms is a problematic topic. This argument takes place in language schools in Turkey. In relation to this issue, Taşkın (2011) has asserted that the majority of the Turkish institutions offering English language courses have English-only strategies. A couple of them firmly oblige the teachers to use the target language as the only means of communication while others pay less attention to using it and admit a considerable amount of Turkish in class. Furthermore, teachers are divided into two groups in relation to the idea of including or excluding the native language in L2 classrooms; the first part asserts on exposing the students to L2 as it is the sole place of learning the language, whereas the second group criticises forcing the students to communicate in L2 which might make them uncomfortable.

Statement of Research Problem

Learners' use of L1 has been explored in great detail. However, teachers' L1 use is limited in the literature. Therefore, this research will fill the gap in the literature. Moreover, several recent studies have focused on the students' perceptions on using L1 in the class at private or public schools where language is only one part of its curriculum; yet, this study will be conducted with English teachers who have previous experience of teaching and those working in the language schools, which only offer language programs, in Istanbul, Turkey. Also, it will investigate the fact that using L1 supports or hinders the students' ability to learn a second language. In addition, the use of L1 will be debated by EFL instructors in classrooms; therefore, they might be able to understand the importance of using L2 in classrooms and formulate strategies to maximise its use which will allow learners and students to get exposed to it. The teacher then can act as a comprehensible input provider.

Aims and Questions of the Study

In the absence of researching the teachers' use of students' mother language at language schools in Istanbul, Turkey, this study aims to examine the L1 use while teaching whether it is Turkish, Arabic, or any other language in ELT classrooms. The first objective is to investigate the participants' attitudes, the manners and the frequency of using their native language while teaching English, and the favourite functions by teachers to adapt their L1 in ELT classrooms. Moreover, the second objective is to evaluate the outcomes and efficiency of L1 utilisation in the classroom. Also, this research will identify the teachers' attitudes towards home-language use whether they encourage or discourage it. As well, it will explore when teachers prefer to use L1 and the aspects of English they use while switching to L1, along with the kind of activities that the teachers address in their L1. Finally, this study will deal with the following research questions.

1. Is there association between the teachers' gender, age, qualification, and experience on the one hand and L1 on the other?

2. What are the teachers' viewpoints regarding the use of L1 in the English language schoolroom?

Significance of the Study

Despite the discussions that have supported and opposed using L1 in English classrooms, there have been a few studies concerning the opinions of teachers about this topic, (Ferrer, 2011). Therefore, this study will be useful to researchers who want to investigate teachers' practices in respect of the use of L1 in English language schoolrooms, and it will serve as a guide for them. Also, reviewing teachers' perspectives will be an indication of their classroom practices; as a result, they will have the opportunity to evaluate and report on the way they teach, which will also enhance the quality of the program delivered. Furthermore, teachers, instructors, and administrators will reconsider the curriculum and the methods of teaching they have adopted to make the needed changes that will also help to push the students' level upwards. In conclusion, this study aims to check the validity of using L1 in L2 classrooms by a detailed questionnaire that scrutinises the teachers' preferences and aspects to switching from English into the students' own-language while teaching, along with the activities they address in their L1. The point of the study is to unveil the teachers' perceptions on using L1 in L2 classrooms at language schools that offer language-only programs. The last purpose is to evaluate the results and effectiveness of L1 use in L2 teaching.

2. METHODOLOGY

Setting and Participants

The questionnaire targets 103 teachers (53 of them are females) using non-probability convenience sampling. The used questionnaire is adopted from Hall & Cook (2014). The data was collected by Google Forms. The majority of the participants hold BA and MA degrees. A semi-structured interview was conducted with ten teachers (six of them are females) to gain more in-depth insights into the study.

As has been brought up, this study focuses mainly on teachers of English. For that reason, they are the target audience for both the questionnaire and interview. This study is conducted in Istanbul and the data are collected online between December 2021 to March 2022.

Data Collection Instruments

To achieve the purpose of this research, a mixed-methods design, which is the most appropriate research methodology and involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches, is used by employing an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative approach is used to gather data via an online questionnaire while the qualitative approach is adopted to gather data via a semi-structured interview. Thus, the study uses a mixed-methods design to demonstrate the instructors' perceptions and achieve the aims of the investigation.

Procedure

The data of the study was collected using a Google Forms questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire consists of five-point Likert scales in addition to some close ended questions adopted from Hall and Cook (2013). The alpha Cronbach reliability was checked and found beyond the threshold level of .70 as usually defined in the social sciences. The semi-structured interview consists of some questions addressed to different respondents. The questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data, whereas the interviews were used to collect open ended qualitative data. Both research instruments were used to answer the research questions.

3. FINDINGS

Demographic Variables

With respect to the number of respondents, 103 teachers working in some language schools have participated in this study. The first set of questions in the questionnaire aims to ask about the demographic information of the participants. Therefore, the demographic or background variables of the respondents can be divided into age, gender, qualifications and teaching experience. The results of this section are presented below in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Sociodemographic Variables

		Frequency	Percent
Age	20-25	25	24.3
	26-29	23	22.3
	30-33	19	18.4
	34-37	18	17.5
	38+	18	17.5
Gender	Male	44	42.7
	Female	59	57.3
Qualifications	Certificate	7	6.8
	Diploma	5	4.9
	Doctorate (PhD)	2	1.9
	TEFL	5	4.9
	TESOL	6	5.8
	University postgraduate degree	41	39.8
	University undergraduate degree	37	35.9
	Certificate	7	6.8
Teaching experience	0-4	42	40.8
	5-9	27	26.2
	10-14	18	17.5
	15-19	2	1.9
	20-24	7	6.8
	25+	7	6.8
	Total	103	100.0

Teachers' Perceptions about the Use of L1 in L2 classroom

The overall views and practices of own language used in teaching the English language by mostly young, novice and postgraduate teachers in Turkish private schools in Istanbul are diverse. However, most respondents express agreement with the Likert scale items as can be seen from the frequencies and percentages.

Table 2. Likert scale items on the use of others languages in teaching English

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Explain vocabulary	17	13	19	29	25
	16.5%	12.6%	18.4%	28.2%	24.3%
Give instructions	16	8	16	30	33
	15.5%	7.8%	15.5%	29.1%	32.0%
Explain grammar	14	16	19	19	35
	13.6%	15.5%	18.4%	18.4%	34.0%
Develop rapport and a good classroom atmosphere	25	13	22	19	24
	24.3%	12.6%	21.4%	18.4%	23.3%
Correct spoken errors	16	9	17	24	37
	15.5%	8.7%	16.5%	23.3%	35.9%
Explain when meanings in English are unclear	28	16	26	19	14
	27.2%	15.5%	25.2%	18.4%	13.6%
Give feedback on written work	20	11	13	19	40
	19.4%	10.7%	12.6%	18.4%	38.8%

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Test and assess learners	17	13	10	15	48
	16.5%	12.6%	9.7%	14.6%	46.6%
Maintain discipline	22	15	15	30	21
	21.4%	14.6%	14.6%	29.1%	20.4%
Use bilingual dictionaries or word lists	12	19	30	22	20
	11.7%	18.4%	29.1%	21.4%	19.4%
Compare English grammar to the grammar of their own language	9	18	28	24	24
	8.7%	17.5%	27.2%	23.3%	23.3%
Watch English-language TV/video with own language subtitles	10	20	26	14	33
	9.7%	19.4%	25.2%	13.6%	32.0%
Do spoken translation activities	6	24	23	18	32
	5.8%	23.3%	22.3%	17.5%	31.1%
Do written translation activities	5	14	27	14	43
	4.9%	13.6%	26.2%	13.6%	41.7%
Prepare for tasks and activities in their own language before switching to English	5	20	14	22	42
	4.9%	19.4%	13.6%	21.4%	40.8%
I try to exclude own-language use	44	24	16	12	7
	42.7%	23.3%	15.5%	11.7%	6.8%
I allow own-language use only at certain points of a lesson	25	25	19	20	14
	24.3%	24.3%	18.4%	19.4%	13.6%
English should be the main language used in the classroom	56	22	8	11	6
	54.4%	21.4%	7.8%	10.7%	5.8%
I feel guilty if languages other than English are used in the classroom	20	19	32	19	13
	19.4%	18.4%	31.1%	18.4%	12.6%
Own-language use helps learners express their cultural and linguistic identity more easily	18	26	39	16	4
	17.5%	25.2%	37.9%	15.5%	3.9%
Learners like to use their own language in class	15	15	27	23	23
	14.6%	14.6%	26.2%	22.3%	22.3%
Conveying meaning through the learners' own language is useful because it saves time	23	26	23	19	12
	22.3%	25.2%	22.3%	18.4%	11.7%
Own-language use helps learners work together	17	14	27	32	13
	16.5%	13.6%	26.2%	31.1%	12.6%
Learners can relate new English-language knowledge to their own language knowledge	8	16	29	29	21
	7.8%	15.5%	28.2%	28.2%	20.4%
Own-language use makes learners less anxious	5	18	23	38	19
	4.9%	17.5%	22.3%	36.9%	18.4%
Translation is an effective language-learning strategy for many learners	18	26	24	23	12
	17.5%	25.2%	23.3%	22.3%	11.7%
Own-language use reduces the opportunities for learners to listen to and understand English	9	6	19	24	45
	8.7%	5.8%	18.4%	23.3%	43.7%
In multilingual classes, own-language use is impractical	8	10	23	29	33
	7.8%	9.7%	22.3%	28.2%	32.0%
Own-language use reduces the opportunities for learners to speak and practise English	5	9	13	33	43
	4.9%	8.7%	12.6%	32.0%	41.7%
Own-language use leads to interference (negative transfer) from the learner's own language into English	4	10	21	39	29
	3.9%	9.7%	20.4%	37.9%	28.2%
Learners prefer English-only classes	9	20	29	26	19
	8.7%	19.4%	28.2%	25.2%	18.4%
Own-language use stops learners thinking in English	5	14	14	31	39
	4.9%	13.6%	13.6%	30.1%	37.9%
	22	27	13	16	25

Own-language use is more appropriate with lower level learners than higher-level learners	21.4%	26.2%	12.6%	15.5%	24.3%
Own-language use is more appropriate with younger learner than with adults and teenagers	16 15.5%	18 17.5%	23 22.3%	19 18.4%	27 26.2%
Own-language use is more appropriate with larger classes than with smaller classes	9 8.7%	13 12.6%	25 24.3%	22 21.4%	34 33.0%
The amount of own-language use depends on the extent to which the learners' own language is particularly different from English (e.g. uses a different writing system or has a very different grammar)	5 4.9%	21 20.4%	41 39.8%	21 20.4%	15 14.6%
Own-language use is more appropriate with classes that share an own language than classes that have a mixed-language background	17 16.5%	22 21.4%	29 28.2%	18 17.5%	17 16.5%
Teachers can decide for themselves the balance of English and own-language use in the classroom	30 29.1%	28 27.2%	22 21.4%	12 11.7%	11 10.7%
My school/institution expects classes to be taught only in English	36 35.0%	24 23.3%	19 18.4%	12 11.7%	12 11.7%
Learners expect classes to be taught only in English	18 17.5%	21 20.4%	33 32.0%	19 18.4%	12 11.7%
The government/education ministry expects classes to be taught only in English	17 16.5%	23 22.3%	22 21.4%	17 16.5%	24 23.3%
Teachers in my institution feel that classes should be taught only in English	28 27.2%	24 23.3%	23 22.3%	15 14.6%	13 12.6%
The teaching materials used include own-language explanations of English	11 10.7%	17 16.5%	17 16.5%	14 13.6%	44 42.7%
The teaching materials used encourage learners to use their own language during classroom activities	8 7.8%	15 14.6%	21 20.4%	13 12.6%	46 44.7%
My pre-service teacher training discouraged own-language use in class	34 33.0%	21 20.4%	25 24.3%	13 12.6%	10 9.7%
It is common to find discussion of own-language use at professional conferences about ELT	18 17.5%	20 19.4%	29 28.2%	20 19.4%	16 15.5%
My in-service teacher training encouraged own-language use in class	5 4.9%	10 9.7%	22 21.4%	23 22.3%	43 41.7%
It is rare to find discussion of own-language use in the research and literature surrounding ELT	19 18.4%	18 17.5%	28 27.2%	22 21.4%	16 15.5%
There is renewed debate about own-language use within the language teaching literature	10 9.7%	25 24.3%	46 44.7%	11 10.7%	11 10.7%

Most respondents agree with the 49 Likert-scale items on the use of other languages in teaching and learning English.

4. DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

RQ 1: Is there association between the teachers' gender, age, qualification, and experience on the one hand and L1 on the other?

The chi-square tests and ANOVA show some associations and differences between sociodemographic variables and the L1 use and attitudes. For gender, female respondents have positive attitudes towards L1 more than male teachers. For age, younger teachers view L1 use positively more than older teachers. The same applies for qualifications, teachers with BA and MA have positive views of L1, whereas teachers with other certificates like TESOL have negative views. For experience, highly experienced teachers view L1 negatively. Most private school teachers agree with most Likert scale items in that they give space to L1 use only in some cases, and they think that it assists learners to demonstrate identity culturally and linguistically in an easier way.

Natives speakers who do not speak student's L1 have been used as a baseline of comparison with non-native speakers who speak the language of students (Hall & Cook, 2014).

RQ 2: What are the teachers' viewpoints regarding the use of L1 in the English language schoolroom?

Overall, most teachers have a positive view of the usage of L1 in English schoolrooms. However, they are concerned about its negative sides like interference. Teachers displayed more complicated and average attitudes towards the use of L1 in this study, which agrees with the findings conducted by Hall, & Cook (2014). In other studies, teachers expressed the feeling of being guilty (Macaro, 1997; Littlewood and Yu, 2011).

5. CONCLUSION

Pedagogical Implications

Many were the implications that can be drawn based on the findings of the current study. Since there are positive attitudes towards the use of L1 and foreign language teaching and learning. Therefore, it can still be used and systematised in language education and curriculums. Moreover, most respondents reported the use of their own language in assessment as it can reduce the anxiety of the testees. Therefore, the test designers should start thinking of different ways to include translation in English tests. If translation is used in teaching and learning, it should obviously be used in assessment as the three are intertwined. With regard to proficiency, there is no significant association between one's own language use and proficiency. Therefore, one's own language should not be used by teachers based on the assumption of proficiency (be it low or high).

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