The role of L1 in L2 classes

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Abstract

The use of L1 in L2 classes has long been a controversy. Krashen (1981) proposes that to succeed in L2 learning, L2 should be exposed extensively. Furthemore, he asserts that failure in L2 exposure is caused by available access to use L1. In contrast with Krashen's theory, numerous researchers point out that the use of L1 in L2 classess turns out to be beneficial. According to Cook (2001) and Tang (2002), L2 learning and comprehension increase when L1 is used. This research aimed to reveal the role of L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) by both teachers and learners in English classrooms at tertiary level. The data were obtained from questionnaires distributed to 158 students and 23 teachers at a private university in Yogyakarta. Interviews were also conducted to 5 teachers. The findings show that 59% students and 70% teachers stated that L1 should be used in their class. 87% students stated that L1 should be used during explanation of difficult concepts of L2, and this is in line with 96% teachers who admitted that they use L1 when explaining difficult concepts. 40% students and 61% teachers were quite certain that using L1 in an English class helps learners ' learning process. L1 use is also contributive in lowering learners' affective filter as it will make them more secure, comfortable, and eventually confident to use the target language. The overall findings suggest that L1 should be used in L2 classess, since its absence may hinder learners' learning process.

Keywords: *L1 use, L2 classes, teaching learning process*

INTRODUCTION

In classrooms where English is taught and used as a foreign language, the use of L1 has been hotly debated over years by a lot of researchers. Although prominent researchers have long convinced the effective use of L1 in EFL classes, other researchers prompted that the use of L1 turned out to be less essential. For decades, one of the most popular theories of L2 acquisition is Krashen's. It has been widely known that Krashen (1981) suggests that in order for successful L2 learning to take place, there should be maximum exposure of L2. Thus, Krashen's theory on L2 acquisition has long been largely adopted and referred in studies of L2 acquisition by a lot of researchers. In contrast with Krashen's finding on the effectiveness of maximum exposure of L2 in L2 acquisition, Cook (2001) and Tang (2000) find out that L2 learning and comprehension increase when L1 is occasionally used. Referring to the

conflicting findings of previous studies in L2 acquisition, it is typically a problem of to what extent L1 should be used in EFL classrooms.

In the Indonesian EFL context, English is not commonly used outside the classrooms. Although in their daily lives learners can freely access English materials (printed materials, audios, and videos) from the Internet, the use of English to communicate with others is uncommon. Therefore, the frequent use of L1 in English classes by both teachers and learners usually takes place with the consideration that potential problems that may occur during the teaching-learning interaction, especially in communication, can be minimized. It would be of special interest to investigate in what situations L1 (Indonesian) is used during English teaching-learning. In addition to the abovementioned facts, Indonesian EFL teachers hold various beliefs about English learning. Many of them who strongly believe in Krashen's theory of L2 acquisition usually promote the use of English as much as possible to provide optimum exposure, so that learners will eventually be familiar with the target language. In contrast, a lot of teachers in Indonesia still believe on the effectiveness of Grammar Translation Method in L2 learning. With this method, teachers will directly translate their sentences into the Indonesian language, especially when giving instructions or when learners look confused in attempt to understand what the teachers say in English. The mediocre belief comes from those who claim that the frequency of L1 usage depends on learners' level of L2 proficiency. In classes with learners of lower proficiency, too much use of L2 by teachers will demotivate them. On the other hand, maximum use of L2 will motivate learners of high proficiency. As teachers' beliefs on the use of English in EFL classes cannot be generalized, this study was aimed at revealing the role of Indonesian language during English teaching and learning in a private university in Indonesia. Hopefully this study will also bring benefit for EFL teachers as they will know in what situations L1 should be used during teaching-learning process, so they can apply suitable strategies to make the teaching-learning process effective.

Despite Krashen's (1981) widely-believed theory on second language acquisition and comprehensible inputs, some researchers have brought the contradictory findings. Cook (2001) suggests that although the use of L2 in the classroom gives many benefits, there is no reasonable requirement that for successful communicative tasks to take place L1 should not be used. Similarly, Conteno-Cortes and Jimenez (2004) point out that L1 is significant to be used during problem-solving tasks as it will highly aid learners to accomplish the tasks successfully. L1 use in L2 classes has now been believed to be useful for both teachers and learners. Schweers' (1999) study revealed students' attitude toward the use of L1 in English classrooms of Spanish learners. It shows that the majority of the students demanded L1 to be used during the teaching learning process as it facilitates their learning.

A research conducted by Dujmović (2014) to Croatian students explicitly concludes that moderate use of L1 does not hinder the learning process, even it turns out to be an effective tool to assist learners. In other words, it is not a taboo for teachers to use L1 in their teaching, as it can facilitate the learning process, especially in situations where they need to use it. Dujmović (2014)

also gives strong arguments for using L1 in EFL classes. One of the arguments is that using L1 in EFL classrooms can save teachers' time when explaining and giving instructions. The time can be otherwise allocated for language practice rather than on explanations and instructions given through English, which may lead to students' failure to understand them. This situation particularly happens in learners of lower English proficiency. As they still struggle to communicate their ideas in English, teachers' persistent attitude to use the target language can turn out to demotivate them. This condition will threaten the conducive learning atmosphere. To avoid this potential problems, moderate use of L1 is highly suggested. It implies that teachers should be wise in using the target language - they should know when to use English and when to swich into L1.

Other similar finding about the use of L1 in L2 classes is from a study conducted by Norman (2008). The fact is revealed that students' attitude does not meet the teacher's expectation because they are " unresponsive, inattentive, and unwilling to speak in class" (Norman, 2008). Learners' uncooperative attitude as shown in Norman's study indicates the importance of conducive learning atmosphere - a circumstance which allows them to be actively engaged during the teaching learning activities without having fear. This condition can be achieved if a teacher limits his or her use of L2, especially in beginners' classes.

Some studies on L1 use in EFL classrooms had also been widely conducted by Indonesian researchers. One of them was carried out by Hidayati (2012). She did a research on the use of the Indonesian language in English classes with the purpose to find out if the use of English will increase learners' participation and understanding. The results of her study show that when L1 is used in higher frequency, interaction and understanding between teacher and learners will significantly improve. This is confirmed by Marsakawati (2017) who found out that teachers switch-code to Indonesian language in order to give clarification, build rapport, save time, and reinforce discipline. The more frequent teachers used L1, the more interactive their class would be (Hidayati, 2012). In learning a foreign language, not only interaction among learners but also interaction between teacher and learners that should take place. In a study conducted by Zakaria (2013), learners are often being laughed at by their classmates when they make mistakes in using English, and it will usually demotivate them to learn to use the target language. Therefore, the use of L1 will give a sense of security for learners as it will minimize learners' anxiety.

METHOD
The participants of this study were 158 students and 23 teachers at the language training centre of a private university in Yogyakarta. The students were in semester 1, 3, and 5 and they came from various departments: communication science, governance science, management, and international relations. Although their majors were varied, they studied general English and were taught the four language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Their English proficiency was also heteregoneous. Before taking the classes,

all students were pre-tested to measure their general ability in English. Then, they were put into classes based on the result of their pre-test. The grouping of the classess represented students proficiency in English: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced. The teachers involved in this study were those whose teaching experience was more than 1 year of teaching at tertiary education. Most of them have also gained experience in teaching students at secondary education.

To collect data, two questionnaires adapted from Schweer's (1999) were distributed to 158 students and 23 teachers. The questionnaires were aimed to find out the roles of L1 from the perspective of teachers and students, and in what occasions should L1 be used in the classroom. The questionnaire consisted of two types of questions: Yes/No questions, and close ended questions to which respondents choose the provided answers. To support the data collected through questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to 5 teachers. The data were gained from the close ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Then, after being classified, the respondents' responses to each given response were identified. The responses on the questionnaire were calculated and the data were converted into percentage. After that, the interview results were analyzed to strengthen the result of questionnaire.

Upon collecting data from the respondents, the result of data analysis was mainly categorized into two: teacher's perspective and students' perspective. The questionnaire distributed to both teachers and students were adapted from Schweer's (1999). The result of teachers' responses to the close-ended questionnaire is shown in the table below.

Table 1. Teachers' responses to the questionnaire

Teachers' perspective
1.Should Bahasa Indonesia be used in the English classroom?   • Yes = 70 %   • No = 30%
2. How often should Bahasa Indonesia be used?   • Hardly ever = 53%   • Occasionally = 43 %   • Frequently = 4 %
3. Do you use Bahasa Indonesia when teaching English?   • A little = 56%   • Sometimes = 44%   • Not at all = 0%   • A lot = 0%
4. When is the appropriate time to use Bahasa Indonesia?   • When explaining difficult concepts = 96%   • When making jokes = 48%   • When explaining meaning of new vocabulary = 39%   • When checking students' understanding = 13%   • When summarizing lessons = 8.6%   • When testing students' ability = 8.6%   • When introducing new lessons = 4%

Note: the respondents may choose more than one answer.

5. Are you sure that using Bahasa Indonesia will help students in learning English?
- Quite sure = 61%
- Less sure = 22%
- Not sure = 13%
- Very sure = 4%

As shown in the table above, most teachers (70%) admitted the use of L2 (Bahasa Indonesia) in their EFL teaching. When being investigated for further information, the teachers expressed in their interview that it was almost impossible not to use English at all, especially in classes of learners with lower English proficiency. This fact confirms an earlier study conducted by Stapa & Majid (2006) which concludes that L1 use among lower proficiency English learners helps them to generate more ideas for writing. In other words, learners are able to collect more ideas when they use L1 rather than L2. The lower the level of learners are, the more frequent L2 should be used. During the interview, a teacher explained that Bahasa Indonesia was useful to be used in class when she needed to explain grammar formulas or difficult concepts. It is in line with the result of the questionnaire about the appropriate situation in which Bahasa Indonesia is mostly used by teachers. As much as 96% teachers stated that Bahasa Indonesia was used when explaining difficult concepts. However, the frequency of using L2 in the classroom varies among teachers. It can be seen in table 1 that 53% teachers claimed that Bahasa Indonesia should be hardly ever used when teaching English. When confirmed during the interview, one of them explained that she believed that her giving optimum exposure by using the target language when communicating with the learners would bring positive result for them, as stated by Krashen (1981) that optimum language exposure plays a significant role for learners' L2 acquisition. In addition, teachers who claimed to hardly ever used L2 were those who happened to teach learners of higher proficiency in English. That result is confirmed by the obtained data that 56% teachers admitted that they use a little Bahasa Indonesia during their teaching and 44% claimed that they sometimes use it. An intriguing fact shows that none of them stated that Bahasa Indonesia should not be used at all, nor should it be used a lot. It was investigated further in the interview that Bahasa Indonesia should be used in moderate frequency.

Additionally, in the interview a teacher expressed that using L2 implied a social purpose, which was to build a good relationship with learners. It is to minimize the gap that usually exists between teacher and learners, so that a positive learning atmosphere can take place. It is in accordance with Pan & Pan (2010) who urge that teachers code-switch for interpersonal relations. One way to build interpersonal relation between teacher and students is by telling jokes. As indicated in table 1, 48% teachers used L1 when making jokes with learners. When teaching lower English proficiency learners, telling jokes will be highly unlikely successful if it addressed in the target language (English). In terms of explaining meanings of new vocabulary, 39% teachers admitted that they usually explained the meanings in L1 as it would help learners to understand the precise meaning of an unfamiliar word and to avoid misunderstanding. Otherwise, learners will look puzzled if their teacher insists

on explaining the meanings in English, especially to those of lower English proficiency. It is in accordance with Gunn (2003) in Pan & Pan (2009) who argue that unless tasks and instructions are made simple, L1 should be used for lower proficiency learners. Although not many, the teachers asserted that they used English when checking students' understanding (13%), summarizing lessons (8%), testing students' ability (8%), and introducing a new lesson (4%).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite teachers' frequent use of L1 in L2 classes, the result of the questionnaire shows a rather surprising fact. Of total 23 teachers, only 4% was very sure that using L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) would help learners in learning English. It shows that 61% were quite sure, 22% were less sure, and 13% were not sure. When confirmed during the interview, a teacher who was very sure about the role of using L1 in assisting learners' process of learning English stated that it applied best to learners of particularly lower English proficiency. Confirming Cook's (2001) study, the finding in this study indicates that lower proficiency learners still have limited linguistic knowledge, so using L1 will help them relate L1 with L2 construction.

Students' questionnaires were collected to gain data on their perspective about the use of L1 (Bahasa Indonesia). The data are shown in the following table.

Table 2. Students' responses to the questionnaire

Students' perspective
1. The use of Bahasa Indonesia in the classroom:
• Bahasa Indonesia should be used in English class = 59%
• Bahasa Indonesia should not be used in English class = 41%
2. The use of English by teacher in the classroom:
• Teacher should use English occasionally **=** 58%
• Teacher should use little English = 30%
• Teacher should not use English at all = 8%
• Teacher should use English a lot = 4%
3. When should teacher use Bahasa Indonesia?*
• When explaining difficult concepts = 87%
• When explaining meaning of vocabulary = 56%
• When introducing new lessons = 34%
• When helping students to feel comfortable and self confident = 52%
• When making jokes = 38%
• When checking students' understanding = 27%
• When explaining the relation between English and Bahasa Indonesia = 27%
• When testing students' ability =16%
• When summarizing the taught lesson = 15%
• When assigning students to work in small groups = 13%
The respondents may choose more than one answer.
4. How often should Bahasa Indonesia be used in the classroom?*

- Sometimes = 70%
- Hardly ever = 16%
- Quite often = 5%
- Never = 4%

* 5% respondents did not respond to this question

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5. Why do you prefer to use Bahasa Indonesia in the classroom?*
- In order not to get 'lost' = 44%
- To be more relaxed = 26%
- To feel more 'secure' = 17%

*13% respondents did not respond to this question

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6. Are you certain that when your teacher uses Bahasa Indonesia, it will help you in learning English?*
- Quite certain = 40%
- Very certain = 27%
- Little certain = 21%
- Not certain = 7%

* 5% respondents did not respond to this question

Table 2 shows that 59% students suggested that L1 be used in English classrooms, while 41% students stated that it should not be used in the class. Of 59% who urged the use of L1, most of them were from lower level of English proficiency, whereas 41% students who did not agree on the use of L1 were those of higher proficiency. Regarding the use of English by their teachers, 58% students pointed out that it should be occasionally used, 30% stated that it should be of little use, while 8% said that it should not be used at all. When investigated further, the 8% students were apparently of lower English proficiency. Only 4% students demanded that their teachers used English a lot. Those 4% students were from higher level of English proficiency. The fact that learners' varied tendency in whether or not English should be used is in accordance with Connick-Hirtz (2001) in Stapa & Majid (2006) who highlight that one of the factors that should be considered in using the target language (L2) is students' level of proficiency - whether they are beginners or advanced learners.

In regard to the situations in which L1 should be used by teachers, 87% students stated that Indonesian, instead of English, should be employed when the teacher explained difficult concepts. This result is in line with Bergsleighner's (2002) study which revealed that in learning grammar, students would use L1 for meaning and form negotiation. Similarly, Cook (2001) suggests that due to lower proficiency learners' limited L2 knowledge, teachers should use L1 when dealing with grammar explanation and grammatical instruction. Previous study carried out by Hidayati (2012) also shows teachers' occasional use of L1 when explaining grammar.

Other situation which demands the use of L1 is when teachers explain meanings of vocabulary (56%). Rather than explaining meanings using simple English sentences, the study shows that most learners prefer direct

translation of unfamiliar words. Although teachers may attempt to explain meanings by explaining them using simple structure in English, learners, especially those of lower proficiency, will still have to struggle to understand due to their limited vocabulary mastery. The use of L1 to translate meaning of L2 is in fact efficient as it can save teacher's time (Dujmovic, 2016; Nazary 2008; Anh, 2010 in Hidayati, 2012).

In addition to the above findings, it is necessary to note the presence of affective factor. It was found that 52% students need their teachers to use L1 to help them feel comfortable and self confident. It is in accordance with Canagarajah (2013) cited in Choi & Leung (2017) who states that the use of L1 can minimize affective filter especially for those who lack self confidence in learning L2. As learning a foreign language involves not only learners' cognitive aspect but also their emotional aspect, it is crucial for teachers to be able to create a positive learning atmosphere which can lower learners' affective filter. Other affective factors are implied through learners' preference to use L1, which is to be more relaxed (26%) and to feel more 'secure' (17%). In learning L2, learners need to feel relaxed. This is in line with the result of research conducted by Hidayati (2012). A positive learning atmosphere will occur when learners, instead of feeling threatened, are relaxed during the teaching learning process. Shy and anxious students will be facilitated with the use of L1 as they will be more comfortable and will be confident to use L2 (Zakaria, 2013).

Regarding the other situations in which learners expect the use of L1 by the teacher, the results show that 38% students want the teachers to use L1 when making jokes, 34% want it to be used when introducing new lessons, 27% need the use of L1 to check students' understanding and when teachers explain the relation between English and Bahasa Indonesia. Smaller percentage of students (16%) needs teachers' use of L1 when testing students' ability, summarizing the taught lesson (16%), and assigning students to work in small groups (13%).

Speaking of learners' preference to use L1, the results show that 44% of them use it in order not to get 'lost', which means by using L1, they hope to stay on the right direction during the teaching learning process. Not getting lost could also mean that learners understand when their teacher gives instruction, explains about the lessons, and asks questions. Learners will also find it easier to convey meanings when they communicate with their peers and teacher in L1 rather than in L2.

In regard to learners' certainty, whether they are certain that by using L1 it will help them in learning English, it shows that 40% of them are quite certain, 27% are very certain, 21% are little certain, and 7% are not certain. Learners' varied degree of beliefs about the role of L1 to assist their L2 learning indicates that among learners themselves, it is still questionable whether successful L2 learning can be acquired through L1 use, regardless they are of low or higher proficiency on the target language.

CONCLUSION

The research shows that in the teaching of English as a foreign language the role of L1 is important for both learners and teachers. Among Indonesian English learners, English is only used during in the classrooms . As it is not used for daily communications, to a certain extent imposing the use of only the target language (English) in the classroom will hinder the teaching learning process, particularly in a class of low proficiency learners. Since teachers need to assure that the learners do not misinterpret meanings, instructions, difficult concepts, and grammatical rules of English , L1 is used. The research also reveals that the use of L1 in L2 classes contributes to learners' affective factor. Learners will feel more secure, comfortable, confident, if to some extent, L1 is used in the classroom. In other words, the use of L1 can contribute to the occurence of positive learning atmosphere. All in all, this research confirms previous studies on the important role of L1 use in L2 classes and that abolishing the use of L1 in EFL classrooms, particularly for Indonesian EFL learners, will be counter effective as it will deter the process of L2 acquisition. Thus, Krashen's (1981) theory on L2 acquisition does not work in this particular context - Indonesian EFL learners. However, the writer acknowledges that since some question items in the questionnaire were left blank by the respondents, this result may not represent the general condition in the similar context - the teaching of EFL at tertiary level in Indonesia. Therefore, for future researchers who are interested in investigating the use of L1 in L2 classes, it is suggested that the study be piloted first and data are collected not only from questionnaire and interview, but also from class observation.

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