The Influence of Teachers' Use of L2 on Tertiary Students' Speaking Fluency

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Abstract: One of the main roles placed on language teachers is to create an interactive speaking environment for learners. Nevertheless, field observations of English as foreign language (EFL) teachers' practices reveal weaknesses of classroom oral interaction. Therefore, this study is aimed to explore a technique to help tertiary language instructors enhance their students' oral proficiency through comparing the influence of using the target language inside EFL classrooms with the use of the native language on tertiary learners' speaking fluency. The qualitative data for this study were collected through an observation checklist used in following five EFL classrooms who were enrolled in Semester 1 of university level. The findings of the study proved that there is a high positive influence of using English in classrooms on improving learners' speaking fluency. The study suggests sufficient and efficient use of English as a medium of classroom instruction.

Keywords: Influence, use of the target language, tertiary students, speaking fluency.

1. Introduction

Communicative skills are the main target of teaching and learning EFL. Communicative skills are the different media through which a person can express himself, contact with others, and send a message. However, mastering communicative skills is not a day-and-night matter. Fahad (2012) asserts that "Oral proficiency and communicative skills have always been a benchmark of ELT all over the world" (p. 3). One of the most challenging features of English is speaking fluently, and improving it is supposed to be given full care by English teachers in general, and the ones working in higher education as well.

If someone wants to learn how to swim, which is better– to read a book about swimming or to simply drop himself into a swimming pool? That is the very question– How can an EFL teacher ask students to speak in English; whereas he himself speaks in Arabic most of the English classroom session?!! A lot of scholars have been advocating using the target language in classrooms as much as possible. Macaro (1997) confirms that language learners are expected to use and respond to the target language, and to use their mother tongue only when necessary; e.g., when comparing English and the target language in specific structural aspects. Therefore, this study attempted to shed light on the importance of using English as a prescribed instruction medium in EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

"There is a growing interest among teachers and researchers in understanding how language development occurs through situate interaction, not in laboratories, but in classrooms" (Ohta, 2009, p. 50). The present study theoretical framework is based on second language acquisition-learning theories. A wide range of research has been done concerning speaking skills and using the target language, English, inside classroom. It has been concluded that the more English-like environment is situated where a learner can speak freely, practise more and more English. Vygotsky (1962) argues that "Children learn through social interaction. Children construct knowledge through other people, through interaction with adults. Adults/teachers work actively with children in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)".

In addition, when an EFL teacher sticks to speaking English in language classrooms at a comprehensible level that is asserted by Krashen (2009), this is expected to result in creating a natural discourse for language practice which is completely consistent with the five hypotheses of the language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1995, p. 59). In an environment where teachers adhere to talk and communicate with their students in the target language, students find themselves motivated and at the same time challenged to speak in English within this atmosphere with each other and with their teacher as well. Teachers' should provide a role model by using the target language L2 in classrooms instead of the native language L1.

3. Relevant Studies

In his book entitled "Using the Target Language", Dickson (1996, p. 17) advocates for using the target language (TL) in the classroom. He argues that this the appropriate for learners to learn through the use of the TL. He also says that opportunities for learners to interact through conversation in the classroom are essential for learning, and that, therefore, as much attention should be paid to students' use of the TL as to the teachers’. Here lies the essential role played by EFL teachers to adhere to speaking English during classroom instruction and discussions.

Khati (2011) conducted a study discussing why some EFL teachers use mother tongue inside EFL classroom. He discussed, "It is often felt that teachers and students overuse their mother tongue, in this case, most probably the Nepali in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom particularly in government-aided (Nepali medium) schools of Nepal. This, in result, minimized the students' exposure to English."

Volume 7 Issue 8, August 2018

www.ijsr.net

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Paper ID: ART2019874
DOI: 10.21275/ART2019874
1282
Another thesis, written by Fahad (2012), asserted the importance of enhancing learners' communicative skills through classroom interaction in Iraqi EFL classes. He concluded that in Iraq, the level of EFL learners has always been unsatisfactory because of the apparent lack of exposure to the target language in Iraqi classrooms and the focus has always been on the grammar and form.

In his paper about "Three Effective Classroom Managers: A Look Inside South Korean EFL Classrooms," Guilloteaux (2008) found out that classroom management in language teaching can be broadly depicted in which language teachers adhere to creating and maintaining a classroom environment that can enhance optimal learning of the target language while promoting the development of student self-control. Therefore, managing a language classroom requires overseeing all classroom activities, including language learning activities, social interactions, and student performance. However, Qadumi (2007) developed a study to determine English language teachers’ attitudes toward using Arabic in EFL classrooms in one of the Northern Districts of Palestine, namely, Qalqilya. After he had explained that the problem of his study is controversial, he showed the results to conclude that using L1 or mother tongue can be tolerated, to an extent, inside EFL classroom according to specific criteria.

Based on the body of literature, it would be useful to shed light on the current issue to study that can be summarized, from the researcher's experience, as most EFL teachers do overuse mother tongue, Arabic, beyond all extents. It is supposed to be the time for the target language, English, to be used inside classrooms.

3.1 Speaking Fluency
A fluent speaker of a language is defined as the person who can express himself easily and naturally, producing language in real time without undue pausing or unnatural hesitations (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009; Bohlke, 2014). Fluency priorities meaning and semantic over form in a way to ensure having the task done and the message fully understood.

4. Significance of Research
Cook (2006) states that the learner mainly "needs to encounter the language in order to learn it. One of the functions of teaching is to provide samples of the L2 for language learners. The argument suggests that the teacher can maximise the provision of useful L2 examples by avoiding the L1." Since this study highlights the value of teachers' adherence to using English inside classrooms, it is supposed to be of great value for EFL teachers as it sheds much more light on a teaching medium that can make learning more effective and create a semi-native environment. Also, learners find themselves practise listening to and speaking English more often. All of these are expected to improve university students' speaking skills. In addition, the study can guide syllabus designers to design more speaking activities for teachers and learners to practise. As confirmed by the sociocultural constructivist theory (SCT), the primary means of mediation is verbal interaction using language (Ellis, 2012).

5. Research Question
One of the main communicative skills needed for Saudi students is "speaking" especially in universities and colleges since most if not all courses are delivered in English nowadays. To speak English well, learners need an English-speaking environment to practise the target language. However, this environment is rarely found outside classroom. Here the problem lends itself to be studied. So, creating a semi-English-speaking environment inside English language classrooms is supposed to make up for this lack of milieu. Consequently, the problem, this study tries to investigate, can be stated in the following main question:

How can EFL teachers' adherence to using English inside classrooms boost tertiary students' speaking fluency?

6. Research Methodology
The present study adopted the qualitative research approach in which data were collected through close observation of classroom practices and interaction in order to provide full understanding of the situation and explore strategies that can help in enhancing the interaction in the target language tabbing on the issue studied— the influence of the classroom language used in instruction on participants' speaking fluency. First, the checklist was self-developed by the researcher and its validity was ensured by consulting expertise in TELF. Then, five classrooms, each of 20 students, were followed to collect the data. To ensure the reliability of the analysis and findings, an ELT academician willingly volunteered to be an intercoder for the interpretation of the qualitative findings collected during the performance observations.

7. Data Collection & Analysis Tools
Hereby, the researcher attempted to find one of the available solutions to the problem of the difficulty in speaking English fluently that faces university students. This is done through exploring the effects of the adherence of EFL teachers to using English inside their classes upon the speaking skills of a group of Saudi studying in their first semester of university. Tools used to collect data was an observation report of 30 items developed and validated. The items covered classroom practices and interactions. All items were open-ended to give room for recording and on-the-moment follow of all steps across the classrooms practices of both teachers and learners during the language class sessions. Then, the Atlas.Ti version 8.0 was employed to analyse the obtained data. Atlas.Ti is a software used to help researchers uncover and systematically analyse complex phenomena hidden in the qualitative data collected. The programme provides tools that help to locate, code, and annotate by consolidating large volumes of documents and keeps track of all notes, segments, codes, and videos (Lewins & Silver, 2007).

8. Limitations of the Study
In case of the transformability or generalizing the findings of this study, it should be limited to university students who are
enrolled in their first year. Also, the results explored only speaking skill fluency; other skills were not investigated. Finally, the study was restricted to EFL/ESL context.

9. Findings & Discussion

This research investigated to what extent EFL teachers' adherence to using English inside classrooms can help students to improve their speaking fluency. The main target of all language learners is to speak in that target language; however, learning a second language in educational institutions has traditionally been weighted in terms of listening, reading and writing aspects than speaking in its spontaneous natural features (Starkey, 2012). The present study findings concluded the same problem.

Based on the data gleaned, most observed tertiary students lack speaking fluency in English. Most teachers do not use sufficient English in class, and most classroom practices neglected in no small extent speaking in English as a communicative skill for classroom interaction. Most instruction of all courses is delivered in the native language, instead of the target language even though the materials were in English; elaboration and discussions were mainly native-language based. Most university students depend on Arabic to understand English lessons. Few lessons were conducted using the target language in full. During those class sessions where instructors used English as the main language of classroom discussion, learners tend to be more active and engaged, and their fluency was much obvious to detect.

Based on the explored data, one of the outcomes of using the target language in classroom instruction is boosting learners' motivation. Motivation is the amplifier responsible for 'why' students decide to do something; 'how long' they are willing to sustain the activity, and 'how hard' they are going to pursue it (Dornyei, 2014). This motivation was deemed a main factor influencing students' perceptions toward the target language in a way that helps them overcome speaking anxiety.

In settings where teachers tended to have much control of class and giving themselves the main part of communication, learners were less fluent speakers. On the contrary, in a more lessen environment where students were more engaged in conversations and classroom discussions were more fluent. This is in support to the article of faith that claims that teacher-over-talk weakens the learners' participation; and hence influencing theirfluency negatively.

Using English, the target language, in instruction helped in creating an encouraging community of practice. The ability to participate appropriately in relevant speech events in classroom lessons is central to communicative competence (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013). On asking teachers observed, they do believe that using English in the classroom more often can improve pupils' speaking skills.

10. Conclusion

The present study explored one of the factors expected to contribute to fostering learners' speaking fluency—using the target language as the medium of classroom interaction. Using the target language as a medium of classroom instruction and discussion, and giving more room for learner-talk in classrooms were found effective factors for enhancing learners' speaking skills, learners' autonomy, and motivation in a low-pressure teaching and learning environment. This conclusion comes in line with what stressed by Ellis (2012) that “when anxiety does arise to the use of L2, it seems to be restricted mainly to speaking and listening” (p. 692). Therefore, one of the remedies explored in the present study is the often use of English as the target language in classroom instruction and discussions.

References


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