STUDENTS' PERCEPTION: REASONS AND OPINIONS ON THE USE OF FIRST LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

English is the lingua franca of the world. Being able to speak the language well will secure better jobs and enhance social interactions. In Malaysia, English is spoken as the second language (L2) to Malay, which is the first language (L1). For decades, the reasons and implications of using L1 in English classrooms has been debated. Some believe it interferes in English language learning while others feel it helps in the learning process itself. Therefore, it begs attention to the questions of why students are using L1 in English classrooms and whether L1 should be used in English classrooms. Due to contradicting opinions regarding the matter, this study aims to explore students' reasons and general perception regarding the use of L1 in English classrooms. The sample for this study was 85 undergraduate students who majored in Teaching English as A Second Language (TESL) in Malaysia. Data was collected using questionnaires. The results exhibited a mixed perception towards the use of L1 in English classrooms. Although TESL students preferred to use English language in English classrooms, they also recognized the importance of L1 as a facilitative tool in explaining new points, checking meanings of words or concepts and to finish their tasks quicker. Apart from that, they acknowledged an inclination to use L1 as a medium of socializing in English classrooms due to the idea that English language is purely academic undertaking. Such insight into this topic is helpful for English educators and L2 learners to improve or customise their teaching and learning approach in order to enhance their educating and learning process of the target language.

Keywords**:** Perception, First language (L1), English classrooms, TESL students

Introduction

Throughout the years, issues regarding the implications of using the first or native language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms have been greatly discussed among language scholars (Tamimi Sa'd & Qardemazi, 2015) since the introduction of the German-Translation Method (GTM). No substantial or definitive conclusions and agreements have since been made due to contradicting and varying opinions on the matter. A variety of factors influence the use of L1 and its use as the main medium of instruction and communication, therefore affecting the acquisition of other secondary languages. One factor is the demography of a population. As each race or ethnicity is identifiable by its own unique language, the preponderate existence of one race over the other races naturally advocates the use of the associated language over the rest as the other races assimilate to the use of the main language.

Malaysia is an example of such. It is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country with the Malay race forming the majority of the population at 68.8% in 2016 (Department of Statistics Malaysia). A historical study of Malaysia and its journey to independence and sovereignty reveals the significant role language played as a unifying element. In order to unite all races, the government used Malay as the official language and medium of instruction in schools as is stated in the Federation of Malaya 1956, "….Malay language as the official national language of the country whilst preserving and sustaining the growth of the language and culture of other communities living in the country". As a result, over the decades, Malaysians are generally proficient in one common language, which is the Malay language. Malay language is widely spoken and considered as L1 in Malaysia and the communities therein (Illias et.al., 2011). As for the English language, due to its important value globally, English is learnt as L2 where most students learn the language via classroom teachings in schools. In teaching the English language, the use of L1 has become an anticipated inevitability.

With the Malaysian history and Malaysian classroom environment in mind using L1 in English classrooms can be a helpful tool in learning but the excessive use of L1 can also be a stumbling block for learners as it decreases the opportunity to practice communicating in L2. This will interfere with the learners' language learning process. Negative interference in this form is also prevalent among learners who learn English in 'English as a Second Language' (ESL) and 'English as a Foreign Language (EFL)' classrooms.

According to Nooreiny & Indira Malani (2015), it is considered a norm for students in tertiary levels of education to have problems communicating and socializing in the English language. A study by Gan (2012) in Hong Kong discovered that local students described socializing in English among them as awkward even though they realised the importance of practising the language. The students rather use their L1 to communicate to each other while some perceived language as part of their identity and culture. This resonates with Al Sharaeai (2012) who stated that "Holding on to the first language is sort of holding on to your own culture".

Past studies have shown the advantages and disadvantages in using L1 in English classrooms, as well as students' attitude towards the use of L1. Thus, this study seeks to explore students' specific reasons and opinions that form their perception toward

the use of L1 in English Classrooms in Malaysia. This article is structured as follows: First, a literature review regarding the background of English Education in Malaysia and its challenges, followed by the role of L1 in Second/Foreign language classrooms and a review on students' perception towards the use of L1. Next, the methodology employed in this study followed by the findings and the associated discussion. Finally, the article ends with the conclusion as well as suggestions of future studies that may be undertaken to further enhance this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature pertaining to this study was reviewed and grouped into three main topics which include; the Background of English Education in Malaysia and its Challenges, The Role of L1 in Second/Foreign Language Classrooms and Students' Perception Toward the use of L1.

Background of English Education in Malaysia and Its Challenges

As an ex-colony of the United Kingdom, the English language was established, at the time of occupation, as the main language in Malaysia (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012). The British introduced English as a language of business and education therefore making it the lingua franca in Malaya during the eighteenth century. Only after gaining independence in 1957, was Malay established as the national language. Later, in 1970 when the National Education Policy was drawn and implemented, the medium of instruction in schools was switched from English to Malay, and till today English is learned as a subject for both primary and secondary levels of education. English is considered as the second most important language in Malaysia after the national language. Malaysian learners have a minimum of eleven years of formal English language learning excluding the preschool level (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Realizing the importance of the English language on the global stage, the government has made English a compulsory subject to pass in the secondary school national public examination and a prerequisite to enter Malaysian universities.

Despite government efforts to promote English proficiency, teaching English in ESL or EFL settings can be a challenging task because learners might have little or no prior knowledge of the language. In addition to that, a portion of Malaysian English teachers have a misconception that L2 cannot be taught directly to L2 learners and therefore turn to the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), (Illias et.al, 2011). GTM is one of the first English language teaching methods and it relies heavily on translating L2 to L1 as part of the learning process. Throughout the years however, many different methods have been develop to teach English that forbid the use of L1 due to the fact that scholars claim that in order to learn a new language, full exposure of the language is needed without the interference of L1 (Al Sharraeai, 2012). Examples of such methods include the Direct Method, Audio-Linguicism, the Silent Way and Communicative Language Teaching which emphasize the use of only English in English classrooms.

As a result of varying opinions and different methods of teaching, there is no unified approach exist regarding the use of L1 thereby confusing teachers about the contexts in which L1 should and should not be used. Teachers and students might and probably often rely on personal opinions on whether to use or not to use L1 to facilitate their English language teaching and learning respectively.

The Role of L1 in Second/Foreign Language (L2) Classrooms

Cooks (2001) believed that the learning process of L2 should be treated equally and prioritized as much as L1 is. However, Cooks also stated that the L2 learners are different from L1 learners due to their maturity, greater social-development and larger short-term capacity. The term maturity in Cook's statement refers to learners' language learning skills which have been developed due to their experience in acquiring their first language. By having the experience, learners are able to make connections between the second language that they are trying to learn with their L1. Apart from that, the L2 learners know how to practice their L2 in social settings because of their experience in socializing in their L1. L2 learners are also said to have larger short-term memories because most of them are adult learners with advanced language processing capabilities. Therefore, the process of learning L2 requires different techniques compared to acquiring L1 where L1 can be used as a scaffolding tool in learning L2.

Celik (2008) and Mart (2013) agree that L1 acts as facilitative tool and linguistic resource in an L2 classroom. In another study, Adnan & Mohamad (2014) state that the use of L1 is beneficial in an English classroom but varies according to the language skills of each student in terms of syntax**,** morphology, writing, listening and speaking. Alshammari (2011) and Kovacic & Kirinic (2011) pointed out in their studies that the major reason L1 is used in the English classroom is to check the meaning of new words and concepts. In addition to that, Bozorgian & Fallahpour (2015) found that the use of L1 can reduce students' anxiety in learning L2.

Without a doubt, L1 holds a significant role in English classrooms based on the various reasons highlighted above from previous studies. Nevertheless, using L1 excessively in an L2 classroom leads to crippling effects on students' language learning abilities (Souriyavongsa et. al ., 2013). Another study by Kalanzadeh et. al. (2013) concluded that the overuse of L1 causes dissatisfaction among students which demotivates them from learning L2. Clearly, the use of L1 in a second/foreign language classroom has it pros and cons.

Students' Perceptions toward the Use of L1

There is no specific indication revealing how much L1 can be used in English classrooms. The degree of using L1 varies according to the learner based on his/her opinion. Some respond by allowing the use of L1 in English classrooms (Alshammari, 2011; Jafari, 2013). Similarly, a study by Ching-Wen Jat et. al. (2014) discovered that students in their study had positive attitudes regarding the use of L1 (Chinese) in English classroom. Other than that, students agreed that L1 can be used moderately in English classrooms as a facilitative tool (Kovacic & Kirnic, 2011).

Interestingly however, some studies revealed a contradiction in students' perception towards the use of L1 in the English language classroom. Studies by Al Sharaeai (2012) and Kitjaroonchai & Lampadan (2016) revealed that students preferred using English in English classrooms. A study by Leila & Sayed (2011) also revealed that students are critical about the excessive use of L1 in English classrooms. In addition to that, although students desired greater exposure to L2 they expected the English language teachers to know their L1 and use it when required (Nazary, 2008; Kitjaroonchai & Lampadan, 2016).

In conclusion, past studies present mixed findings regarding students' perceptions on the use of L1 in English classrooms. Even though there are many past studies conducted on the use of first language in English classrooms, most of the studies conducted focus more on teachers' use and opinions of the first language in English classrooms rather that the students (Al Sharaeai 2012). Apart from that, the subjects of the studies were mainly ESL and EFL students, whereas none of them focused on students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) in Malaysia. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate TESL students' perceptions on the use of L1 in English classrooms with the aid of compiled reasons and opinions they have on the matter.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the desired objectives, this study employed a survey research design to gather information. Data was collected through a set of questionnaires from a sample pool of 85 undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) course at a public university in Selangor, Malaysia. In terms of English proficiency level as a control, the students had Band 3 and above for their Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET). Band 3 is the minimum requirement for enrolment for the TESL course.

At the time of data collection, all the students were in their third year of the 4-year degree-granting TESL course and were scheduled to go for their practical in teaching in their final year. The university was using the Malay language as a medium of instruction (L1), but the course was conducted in English. The students were given a paper-based questionnaire designed for this study, in English at a pre-arranged time and location.

The questionnaire was adapted from a study conducted by Wafa Addo Ahmed Al Sharaeai (2012) and contained three sections. Section A, the first section, focused on demographic data. Section B was regarding reasons on why these TESL students spoke their L1 in their English classrooms. This section had 10 items based on a Likert-scale from 1 to 3 which used a force-choice format in which subjects were asked to select from one of the following choices: (1) never, (2) sometimes, and (3) always. The last section, Section C, was regarding opinions and preferences of the TESL students on using their L1 in English classrooms. It consisted of 10 items with an answer scale of 1 to 5; with (1) as strongly agree, (2)agree, (3)neutral, (4)disagree, and (5)strongly disagree.

The data was processed using an SPSS program, in which a frequency analysis was performed and displayed in table form as the distribution of answers given for each statement or question asked to the subject pool. Based on the data obtained from sections B and C, the perception of TESL students towards the use of L1 in English classrooms is discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the results and insights obtained from the questionnaire filled out by the TESL students on the use of L1 in English classrooms. Specifically, the first section discusses the reasons and the second section discusses the opinions TESL students have for using L1 in English classrooms.

4.1 Reasons for using L1 in English classrooms

Table 1 shows the distribution (%) as a measure of how often L1 is used. This distribution is based on a number of specific English language classroom situations that frequently occur and the associated reasons L1 is used in each situation. Items 1 and 3 are related and exhibit the occasional (*sometimes*) use of L1 to explain certain sections of the English lesson. For item 1, 63 (74.1%) students said that they '*sometimes*' use L1 to explain a new point in the lesson, and for item 3, 51 (60.0%) participants said they '*sometimes*' speak L1 in class because they need to ask their classmates to explain a point in the lesson. This exhibits an inclination toward the use of L1 as a facilitative tool in helping explain new points that are not understood in English, which supports the findings of Celik (2008) and Mart (2013).

Table 1: Reasons for Using L1 in English Classrooms

Distribution (%)			
Item	Never	Sometimes	Always
1. I speak my first language in English class because I am explaining a new	7 (8.2%)	63 (74.1%)	15 (17.6%)

	point in the lesson to a classmate**.**			
2.	I speak my first language in English class because I want to chat with my classmates about topics that may not be connected to class.	6 (7.1%)	40 (47.1%)	39 (45.9%)
3.	I speak my first language in English class because I need to ask a classmate to explain a point in the lesson for me.	13 (15.3%)	51 (60.0%)	21 (24.7%)
4.	I speak my first language in English class because I need to check the meaning of a new word or concept during the lesson.	9 (10.6%)	50 (58.8%)	26 (30.6%)
5.	I speak my first language in English class because I cannot think of the correct word in English when talking to my classmates.	6 (7.1%)	56 (65.9%)	23 (27.1%)
6.	I speak my first language in English class because my classmates start talking to me in my first language while we work on a task.	5 (5.9%)	40 (47.1%)	40 (47.1%)
7.	I speak my first language during English class when I talk about personal things with my classmates.	6 (7.1%)	36 (42.4%)	43 (50.6%)
8.	In English class, I speak my first language with other members of my group who speak my first language because we want to finish class activities faster.	10 (11.8%)	52 (61.2%)	23 (27.1%)
9.	I speak my first language with my classmates during English class because it makes me feel more connected to my culture.	21 (24.7%)	41 (48.2%)	23 (27.1%)
10.	Because I can't think of the words in English, I speak in my first language, even when others may not understand me.	19 (22.4%)	43 (50.6%)	23 (27.1%)

In item 4, 50 (58.8%) said that they '*sometimes'*, 26 (30.6%) said they '*always'* and 9 (10.6%) said they '*never'* use L1 to check the meaning of a new word or concept during the English lesson. A relatively high number of '*sometimes'* and '*always'* compared to '*never'* display congruity with studies done by Alshammari (2011) and Kovacic & Kirinic (2011) which highlight the major reason for using L1 in English classrooms as, 'to check the meaning of new words and concepts'.

Items 2 and 7 represent the use of L1 among students in speaking about non-lesson-related topics in the English classroom. For item 2, most of the students, 40 (47.1%) chose '*sometimes'* and 39 (45.9%) chose '*always'* as their answer regarding the use L1 to chat with their classmates about matters that are not related to their English lesson. This suggests that TESL students preferred to use L1 to socialize among themselves which they described as more 'natural'. This finding is in agreement to a study conducted by Gan (2012) where L2 learners found it awkward to speak English among themselves regarding non-lesson related topics. As for item 7, 43 (50.6%) chose '*always'*, followed by 36 (42.4%) who chose '*sometimes'* and only 6 (7.1%) chose '*never'* as their answer. Students have a higher tendency of speaking in their L1 regarding personal matters.

Items 6 and 8 explain the use of L1 during classroom tasks. The students regularly used L1 while trying to complete their tasks, while a majority of them, 52 (61.2%) believed that they can finish their tasks earlier if they communicate in their L1. The reason why speaking in English might consume more time among the students could be because they are not fluent enough in English to complete the assignments efficiently and in a timely manner. This leads to items 5 and 10, which represent limitations in

vocabulary among TESL students. 56 (65.9%) students claimed that they '*sometimes*' use L1 when they fail to find the correct word in English and only 19 (22.4%) said that they '*never*' use L1.

As for item 9, 41(48.2%) said they '*sometimes*' and 23 (27.1%) stated they '*always*' use their L1 with their classmates in the English classroom because it makes them feel connected to his or her culture. A big number of TESL students use L1 with their classmates even though they are in English classrooms. This shows a strong connection between L1 and culture. The findings agree with and is relatable to a statement by Al Sharaeai (2012) who said that "Holding on to the first language is sort of holding on to your own culture".

4.2 Opinions on Using L1 in English Classrooms

Table 2 presents the TESL students' opinions and the associated distribution of each opinion in the sample pool for using L1 in their English classrooms. Item 1 focuses on the students' preference on having an English teacher who speaks their L1. A majority of the students, 32, (37.6%) had a '*neutral*' opinion on the matter. This shows that it does not affect the students whether their teacher knows their L1 or not.

Items 2 and 8 represent the students' opinions on speaking their L1 with their classmates in the English classroom. For item 2, 44 (51.8%) students had a '*neutral*' opinion about sitting next to a classmate who speaks their L1, followed by the second highest frequency which was 20.0%, who did not prefer to sit next to their classmates who speak their L1. Similarly, in item 8, 39 (45.9%) students had a '*neutral*' opinion followed by the next highest frequency which was 28.2% who '*disagree*' about speaking in their L1 with their classmates during English classes. Based on these two items, it is suggested that the TESL students prefer not to speak their L1 with their classmates in English classrooms.

Table 2: Opinions for Using L1 in English Classrooms

Distribution (%)					
Item	**Strongly agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
1. In English class, it is best to have a teacher who can understand my first language.	22 (25.9%)	26 (30.6%)	32 (37.6%)	4 (4.7%)	1 (1.2%)
2. I prefer to sit next to a classmate who speaks my first language in English class.	7 (8.2%)	13 (15.3%)	44 (51.8%)	17 (20.0%)	4 (4.7%)
3. I think my English class should have an "English Only Policy." (Only English is allowed in the English classroom.)	30 (35.3%)	26 (30.6%)	24 (28.2%)	5 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)
4. As my English improves, I am more comfortable speaking only it in English class.	38 (44.7%)	23 (27.1%)	17 (20.0%)	6 (7.1%)	1 (1.2%)
5. I want to be able to speak my first language in English class when I feel I need to.	10 (11.8%)	23 (27.1%)	33 (38.8%)	15 (17.6%)	4 (4.7%)
6. It's not important to speak only English in class as long as I am completing the course tasks.	1 (1.2%)	9 (10.6%)	24 (28.2%)	38 (44.7%)	13 (15.3%)
7. Using dictionaries and resources in the first language should be allowed in English class.	16 (18.8%)	27 (31.8%)	30 (35.3%)	8 (9.4%)	4 (4.7%)
8. The course is not a	7	13	39	24	2

		(8.2%)	(15.3%)	(45.9%)	(28.2%)	(2.4%)
	speaking class.					
9.	I think I speak in my first language more often than I speak English in English class.	13 (15.3%)	27 (31.8%)	22 (25.9%)	19 (22.4%)	4 (4.7%)
10.	Having to speak English only in class makes me feel nervous.	8 (9.4%)	12 (14.1%)	31 (36.5%)	20 (23.5%)	14 (16.5%)

Item 3 focuses on the "English Only" policy in the English classrooms. 30 (35.3%) students which formed the majority, '*strongly agreed*' with the idea of using only English in the English language class. Nevertheless, the students still considered the need to use materials in their L1 for the English classroom as 30 (35.3%) and 27 (31.8%) students chose '*neutral*' and '*agree*' respectively regarding item 7. Item 7 highlights the use of dictionaries and resources in L1 for English class. From this, it is known that the TESL students recognised the role of L1 as a facilitative tool and linguistic resource in learning the English language.

Items 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10 refer to personal language preferences of the TESL students. Most of the students, 38 (44.7%) of them '*strongly agree*' that they do feel more comfortable speaking English as they become more proficient in the language. However, for item 5, 38.8% chose '*neutral*' followed by 27.1% who '*agree*' on speaking in their L1 during English class when they need to. This data suggests that the students felt that they only speak in their L1 because they are not fluent enough in English. Item 6 showed that TESL students felt it is important to speak English in completing their tasks. 38 (44.7%) TESL students '*disagree*' about not emphasizing speaking the English language when completing a task.

Interestingly, no matter how much the students felt that they should be speaking only English, item 9 revealed that the students realised that they still use more of their L1 compared to English language in their English classrooms. 27 (31.8%) students which formed the majority, '*agree*' that they speak more in their L1. On the other hand, item 10 shows that most of the TESL students felt it is natural for them to have to speak English only in class. This is proven when 36.5% chose '*neutral*' regarding the matter of feeling nervous about having to speak English only in class.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the findings of this study suggest that TESL students have mixed perceptions on the use of L1 in English classrooms. The students generally prefer to speak English in English classrooms but at the same time, they also acknowledge the role of L1 in helping them to learn English. The students use L1 as a facilitative tool in explaining new points, checking meanings of words or concepts and to finish their tasks quicker. Secondly, it is suggested that TESL students perceive English language as a purely academic undertaking. The students try to minimize their use of L1 when it is related to English lessons but choose to socialize in L1 with their classmates during English classes. Speaking their L1 among themselves makes them more relatable and it is their norm when socializing with communities outside the English classrooms.

The results of this study may enlighten TESL students or second language speakers to understand and realise their own reasons and opinions that forms their perception about using L1 in English classrooms, which translates to the tendency of using L1 in English classes. Having this information can help students decide whether or not to use their first language in their English classrooms and if so, to use it judiciously and effectively, with acquiring the L2, as the target.

As mentioned by Parilah et al. (2013), learning a new language is a complex task which requires a considerable period of time, thus it is important to have sufficient practice in using the target language and use it to the fullest in English classrooms. Therefore, for future research, studies should be done to investigate which method is more effective in helping students to acquire better L2 language proficiency, with or without L1 interference in English classrooms. The findings of the study will definitely help English language educators to adjust their teaching approach or environment to cater to the students' needs in order to maximise the learning ability and grasp the L2 efficiently and effectively.

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