



A Survey of Elementary and Intermediate Learners' Attitudes towards the use of Vietnamese by Teachers in General English Classes

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Abstract: *This study was conducted in order to figure out the attitudes of Vietnamese EFL students towards their mother language use in teaching English classes. 45 elementary-level students and 34 pre-intermediate-level ones at 2 English centers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, were asked to fill out a 12-item questionnaire adapted from the ones of the three previous researchers including Prodromou (2002), Bateman (2008) and Afzal (2013). The result revealed that the students of both English levels have positive answers towards their L1 using in L2 classes as a beneficial way to give further explanation on difficult grammar points and the confused vocabulary's meanings.*

Keywords: *L2 acquisition, EFL teaching and learning context, Vietnamese students, learners' attitudes towards L1 use in classes*

1. INTRODUCTION

English has been considered one of the most popular languages used by different people in diverse countries to communicate, to transfer information, and to express their thoughts together. Therefore, studying English has become more and more popular, and a fashionable tendency in not only schools but also English centers in Vietnam. However, the problem of using L1 in teaching L2 classes has been a never-ending and argumentative issue among teachers, learners and linguists throughout the world from the past until now, and Vietnam has not been an exception. In the last few decades, most Vietnamese English teachers have employed a Grammar Translation Method as part of their English teaching processes. However, this method has been considered an ineffective one as the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has gradually been adopted from Western countries and become more popular since the 1990's. Globally, a substantial body of linguistic experts have argued that CLT strongly focuses on the creation of a studying environment in which learners can interact with English as much as possible, with the complete elimination of L1 in L2 classes.

This study is a response to Haifa Al-Nofaie (2014) that there is a demand to survey the attitudes of learners toward L1 use in different EFL teaching and learning contexts in order to find an answer to the question “should L1 be used in EFL classes in the Vietnamese English-learning context?” This answer can identify whether learners expect their English teachers to use Vietnamese during their teaching and learning processes, as well as figure out how many percent of Vietnamese learners think it helps them to acquire English better.

The results of this study can help teachers to understand their learners' viewpoints on their teachers' Vietnamese use in GEC's (General English Classes). Through those findings, teachers can evaluate and adjust their teaching methods as well as their Vietnamese use in necessary and appropriate contexts by themselves to enhance their students' English-learning process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Related Literature Review

In this on-going debate, there are many statements of conclusion from eminent linguists around the world arguing for the ineffectiveness of L1 use in L2 classes. Ellis (1994) said that using too much L1

in learning L2 classes may create negative influences on the students' target language communication competence. And, Selinker and Gass (2008) argued that if the L1 of learners has too many differences compared to the L2, the L2 acquisition will suffer interference from the L1 due to the negative transfer of learners from L1 to L2. The two authors mentioned above have been typical of the expressions for the perspective, "L1 should not be used in L2 classes". For the opposing argument, linguists Cook (2001), Brown (2000), and Schweers (1999) have published works supporting the use of L1 in L2 classes. Cook (2001) stated that learners should have an appropriate language-learning environment, and the use of mother tongue in classes did not have any negative impacts on target language learning. Further, Brown (2000) demonstrated that L1 can be a facilitating factor helping learners to enlarge their lack of L2 knowledge, not just an interfering factor, and Schweers (1999) suggested that teachers should incorporate L1 into L2 lessons in order to provide learners with a sense of security, to validate their knowledge, and to allow them to express themselves.

2.2. Previous Studies

Schweers (1999) conducted research identifying the desired level of L1 (Spanish) use for students and their teachers in L2 (English) EFL classes at the University Of Puerto Rico Spain. In order to explore the frequency of and appropriate situations when Spanish should be used, Schweers asked his participants in three classes to complete a questionnaire to acquire information on their attitudes towards the use of Spanish in their English classes at the beginning, middle, and end of the first semester of 1997-1998. The research concluded that 88.7 percent of students and 100 percent of teachers thought Spanish should be used in English classes. Both students and teachers expressed their high appreciation on using Spanish to teach new, difficult vocabulary, and grammar points. Furthermore, up to 67 percent of students stated that using Spanish in classes helped them to feel more comfortable and understand the lessons better. For Schweer, he strongly believed that L1 could benefit L2 learning process effectively, based on the appropriate incorporation of L1 and L2 in classes by teachers.

In addition, Tang (2002) carried out a similar study that focused on discovering the attitudes of students and teachers toward using Chinese in English classrooms in China. Tang employed questionnaires, class observation and interviews to identify the frequency of and situations in which Chinese should be used in classes. Tang found that 70 percent of students and teachers appreciated the use of Chinese in English classes. For teachers, it was a very effective tool to save time in classes while, for students, use of their mother tongue helped them to acquire grammar items better. Furthermore, most of the participants in.

This research aims to explore the attitudes of elementary and intermediate learners towards the use of Vietnamese by teacher's in general English classes. Specifically, this study is conducted for discovering whether learners expect their English teachers to use Vietnamese during their teaching and learning process. Furthermore, this research also seeks to determine how many percent of Vietnamese think it helps them to acquire English better.

2.3. Context of the Study

The study was conducted at the English Center of HCMC Research and Translation Association in District 8, and LiênMỹ English Center in District 11, HCMC, Vietnam. Furthermore, These English centers have many kinds of English courses, especially General English Courses for both elementary and intermediate learners that completely meets the nature of the research and creates good conditions for the researcher to collect data during the implementation phase.

2.4. Participants and Sampling Procedure

In order to ensure the entire population characteristics reflect and compare the different viewpoints of the two levels of learners, 45 elementary students (males: 26 and females: 19) and 34 pre-intermediate ones (males: 16 and females: 18) from the English center of the HCMC Research and Translation Association and LiênMỹ English Center were conveniently chosen and asked to complete the carefully prepared questionnaires in order to help the researcher to collect data for analysis. Participants in this research were both males and females coming from different learning English backgrounds.

2.5. Research Instrument

The 12-item questionnaire used in this quantitative research was adopted and adapted from the questionnaire of Shadi Afzal (2013), Blair E. Bateman (2008), and Prodromou (2002), who conducted relating studies aiming at discovering the attitudes of students towards the use of L1 in EFL class. The questionnaire included two sections - section A and section B. Section A had 6 items, with three close-ended questions to better understand the participants' learning backgrounds. Section B contained 6 items, with three close-ended questions and three linker questions, in order to more deeply discover learners' viewpoints about their teachers' Vietnamese use in English-learning classes. This questionnaire was redesigned carefully to be more suited to the general teaching and English-learning context of Vietnam.

2.6. Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected on March 18, 2016 and March 19, 2016, and all the participants were approached in their usual classes in both the English centers mentioned above. In order to collect information about the attitudes of learners in both elementary and pre-intermediate levels towards Vietnamese use by their teachers in GECs, a brief explanation was given with clear instructions, before the questionnaires were distributed and learners asked to complete their answers within ten minutes. All the participants were asked to strictly follow the general requirements and the whole collected data or information was used only for conducting the research.

To create good conditions for the better collection of information for English learners at elementary and pre-intermediate levels, the questionnaire was translated from English into Vietnamese to help them easily understand the meaning of questions and answers, in order to minimize the misunderstanding of them in English. In addition, any misunderstandings relating to the academic phrases or the content of the questionnaire were explained directly by the researcher in the classes.

2.7. Data Analysis Procedure

All the collected data were counted carefully and transferred into percentages in order to help the researcher to compare and reveal the final findings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher distributed 79 questionnaires to 79 elementary and pre-intermediate learners in 7 classes at the English Center of HCMC Research and Translation Association, District 8 and LiênMỹ English Center, District 11.

As shown in Figure 1, the results of this study illustrated that, in the elementary classes, 44.44 percent of elementary learners said that their teachers fairly often used Vietnamese in GECs, while 28.89 percent and 15.56 percent of elementary learners stated that their teachers rarely or sometimes employed the mother tongue in classes. Some of them thought that their teachers used Vietnamese frequently in classes, with 11.11 percent, and none of them voted for the "never" option. However, in the pre-intermediate classes, they shared the same opinions about the question as mentioned above - specifically, teachers sometimes or rarely used first language in English classes, occupying 50 percent and 20.59 percent respectively. The remainder, 29.41 percent, stated that Vietnamese was fairly often used in their English-learning classes by their teachers.

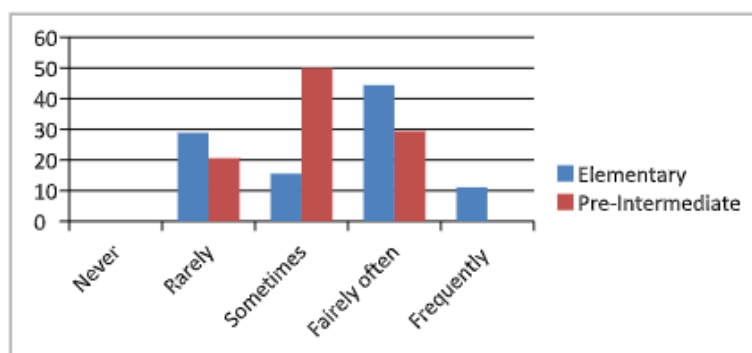


Figure1. Current frequency of Vietnamese used by teachers in GECs

It seemed that English teachers tended to employ Vietnamese in English classes in order to help elementary learners to become acquainted with English, as well as to acquire it better at the first stage of learning a foreign language. However, English teachers had a tendency to reduce their mother tongue, creating time for more opportunities for pre-intermediate and intermediate learners to practice listening and speaking skills in English classes.

As shown in Figure 2, 44.44 percent and 33.33 percent of elementary learners said that it was normal or very supportive when their teachers use Vietnamese in English classes. Most pre-intermediate learners stated that using mother tongue in teaching English classes was either neutral or quite supportive for them, with 55.88 percent and 35.29 percent respectively. In particular, as shown in Figure 3, both elementary and pre-intermediate learners strongly agreed that Vietnamese should be used in their GECs by their teachers, with a quite high agreement percentage of 77.78 percent for elementary level, and 88.23 percent for pre-intermediate level.

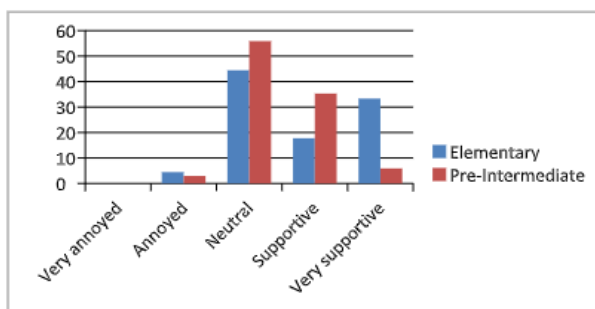


Figure2.Learners' attitudes towards their teachers' Vietnamese in GECs

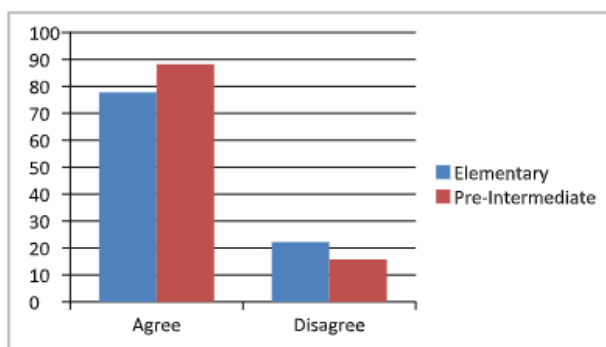


Figure3.Learners' attitudes towards whether Vietnamese is used by English teachers in GECs

Furthermore, the research found that 64.42 percent and 68.81 percent of elementary and pre-intermediate learners respectively disagreed that using mother tongue in teaching English classes wastes too much time in classes, or creates less time for L2 practice, or decreases learners' learning motivation, or may be inauthentic, or create boredom during their English-learning processes.

In contrast with that, 77.49 percent of elementary and 71,68 percent of pre-intermediate learners totally agreed that Vietnamese should be used appropriately by the teachers in some teaching English situations, such as explaining new words, difficult grammatical items and easily-misunderstood concepts, for giving instructions for activities, giving feedback for tasks in classes, repairing learner's mistakes, solving discipline issues, checking learners' comprehension, answering learners' questions relating to the lessons, and for distinguishing the differences between Vietnamese and English culture and language styles to help learners to understand and acquire English better.

Surprisingly, both elementary and pre-intermediate learners strongly agreed that using L1 in L2 classes definitely helped them to understand new words, grammar items and difficult concepts better, to understand the meaning of the reading content better, to have basic awareness of the differences between the two cultures and two language styles, and especially, helped learners to feel more relaxed and comfortable during their learning process.

Finally, there were so many different opinions concerning the issue "What percentage of Vietnamese use most helps learners to acquire English better in classes?" The number fluctuated greatly for the

options given. 38.23 percent and 23.52 percent of pre-intermediate learners respectively thought that Vietnamese should be used about 50% or 70% over the total class time, while 31.11 percent of elementary learners agreed L1 should be limited to under 50% of total class time. A further 15.56 percent of elementary learners thought 70% of the total time in the English-learning classes was optimal.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher strongly believes that L1 continues to play an absolutely crucial role in teaching foreign language, especially for learners at elementary and pre-intermediate levels in EFL teaching and learning contexts, when their language acquisition competence is still too low to understand completely all the input given by the teachers in classes without any support from their mother tongue. Many noted linguists have argued for using mother tongue in teaching foreign language classes and, especially in Vietnamese teaching and English-learning contexts, the use of Vietnamese in English classes should depend on learners' practical demands, their real English levels and their English acquisition competence.

Notwithstanding the contributions of this research's findings to the second language acquisition problem in Vietnamese EFL contexts, there were some drawbacks which the researcher could not control. Some of the weak points of this study were that the sample size was small, the participants were not chosen randomly, and the quantitative research could not glean deeper findings or insight into the problem. Therefore the results of this research could not generalize for all elementary and pre-intermediate learners, nor reflect all their individual perspectives on their teachers' Vietnamese use in English classes in all English centers in HCM City. Furthermore, due to too small a sampling size, this study also could not ensure the validity and the reliability of this research through persuasive statistical evidence.

It is recommended that further research should be implemented on larger scales to discover more attitudes of not only learners with different English levels but also teachers in different English centers, schools and universities in districts of HCM City, in order to help Vietnamese teachers to have more prestigious findings about learners' attitudes towards the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms.

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