

The use of Mother Tongue in Group Work

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Introduction

This Action Research project is concerned with the use of mother tongue in EFL classrooms. It specifically seeks to decrease the use of Arabic during group work in grade three female classes in primary schools in the UAE. This was based on an assumption I had that Arabic is used; therefore the first part of this paper describes how I checked this assumption. The second part of this essay describes the action research that I conducted on the basis of my preliminary findings.

Background

Throughout the years I have been teaching as a student teacher, the use of mother tongue during group work has concerned me. Therefore, I decided to investigate the topic as my action research topic. When I first started thinking of this topic I had many questions in my mind. Why do the student use mother tongue and when? Is it because it is easier? How do they think about English? Is it just another subject like math or history or do they see it as a communication tool? If they think of English as another subject can we change this attitude? How? Do the students realize that they need English in the future? How much English can they actually use? How realistic is it to expect them to use English? Do they have enough English to be able to use it for communication? Are they taught how to use English to communicate, or do they just know words and vocabulary in English? Should there be times when we allow them to use Arabic?

Rationale

I investigated this problem because I had found that in most of my classes during Teaching Practice (TP) over the last four years, when students did group work they used Arabic and they hardly ever tried to use English to communicate with each other. I tried to make them use English but mostly they used English when I was near their group and whenever I moved away to another group they returned to Arabic.

Literature Review

Importance of Group Work

In order to best understand what this action research project was investigating it was first worth looking at the importance of group and pair work in EFL classes.

Atkinson (1993) states, "...pair and group activities are important because they give more students more practice more of the time"(41). Long and Porter (in Nikolov 1999) make the point that working in pairs and groups is useful as it increases language practice opportunities, improves the quality of students talk, helps to individualize instruction, establishes a positive affective climate, reduces anxiety and motivates learners to learn. (72) Lightbown & Spada (1999) make the point that "the student produces not only a greater quality but also a greater variety of speech in group work than in teacher centered activities"(124).

To conclude it can be said that group and pair activities are important; because they let the learners practice the language confidently and at the same time it gives the teacher time to work with slower learners.

Teacher led use of mother tongue

After examining the importance of group work let's move to another concept, which is teacher led use of mother tongue. Why do teachers use mother tongue? Reilly and Ward (2000) address some reasons for teachers to use mother tongue with young learners. They give three reasons, which are: security, need for communication and giving instructions. By security they mean when small children come to the school for the first time they need time to adjust to the school environment, so they don't need teachers speaking with them in a foreign tongue. (4) Auerbach (in Schweers 1999) agrees with this view stating that:

Starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learners are then willing to experiment and take risks with English (6)

In a similar way, Dajani (2002) expresses the view that even teachers of more advanced learners should use the students' mother tongue. She argues:

Teachers can use the learners' first language, along with the target language, to raise awareness of their learning style and the strategies they use and so help them assess their own weaknesses and strengths and evaluate their development in the process of learning a foreign language. (65)

Madylus, (2001) however, argues, "Young children do not have the language to talk about the language and have not yet developed the sophisticated skills necessary to compare and contrast language systems"(23).

Students' use of mother tongue

After looking at why teachers use the mother tongue in EFL classrooms and whether they should use it or not, we should now look at why students use the mother tongue in the EFL classroom and for what reasons. Swain & Lapkin (in Carless 2002) found that "Pupils used the first language for three main purposes: moving the task along, focusing attention and interpersonal interaction" (392). Bassano (2003) also gives reasons for the use of mother tongue in group work, stating:

- o Students mostly use their mother tongue when they are asked to perform a task which needs more English than they have,
- o when they are asked to follow unclear instructions, and
- o when they are invited to experiment. (35)

Avoiding the use of mother tongue

Examination of the reasons that teachers and students have for using the mother tongue brings to our mind the questions: Why should we avoid the use of mother tongue? and What benefits do the students get from using English all the time? Madylus (2001) says, "The more language they (the students) hear around them the more opportunities there are for them to pick it up in context"(23). In a similar way Schweers (1999) expresses the view that "If you (the teacher) use English, you will force your students to try to communicate with you in that language, giving them the opportunity to produce comprehensible output and negotiable meaning"(9). The teacher will also be sending a message to her students when she is speaking English all the time; she is trying to tell her students that languages are different, they don't have to fear a new language, they can understand that they aren't under pressure to use the new language (23).

Strategies to decrease the use of mother tongue

After looking at some of the reasons for avoiding the use of mother tongue we should now consider how to do this. There are many strategies that teachers can use to avoid the use of the mother tongue, such as using gestures and English words that are similar to the mother tongue, as well as using international English (Reilly and Ward 2000: 5). The international English words that the teacher can use will be words like taxi, hamburger, cinema, and T-Shirt. In the same way Madylus's research (2001: 23) provides some strategies which teachers can use, like illustrating the language clearly, using visuals, gestures and facial expressions. They can also use stories for language presentation and practice.

Carless's 2002 results (393) demonstrate some steps for the teacher to follow to make their students use English. The first step is for teachers to use the language themselves as good language models for the students. The second step is that as they teach the students the language they need to complete the task, they should also be taught language interactions like "Can you repeat?" and "You Start". The final step is that the teachers should accept a certain amount of use of mother tongue from the students. Maley & Duff (1982) make the point that moving students from group to group prevents them from getting into deep conversation in their own language. (21)

In a similar way Bassano (2003) suggests that for the students to use English in group work teachers should make sure the following three steps are followed. The first step is that the students have enough vocabulary and English skills to do the task. The second step is that the teacher has modeled and explained the activity clearly so that the students understand the instructions and objective of the work. The final step is ensuring the topic is relevant, personalized and meaningful so that the students are motivated. (35) He also suggests some strategies to use during group work to help the students speak English. One of the strategies is making cards on which is written "English Practice" and giving a number of them to each group; during the group activity move around the class and take one card whenever they speak in the mother tongue. The group with the most number of cards at the end is the winner and will receive a prize. (36)

Methodology

What is Action Research?

As Van Lier (1994) points out the idea of action research is more than 60 years old. (31) Through these years it has been defined in many ways, and one of the earlier definitions defined by Cohen and Manion (in Curtis) is "...an on the spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation"(9). As Wallace (2001) also suggests "...it is done by systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what your future practice should be"(4). In order to answer my question "How can the use of the mother tongue be decreased in group and pair work?" I needed to do action research because it's a professional action that answers teachers' personal questions.

Data collection tools

I decided to try to find answers to my questions by conducting a preliminary investigation using a variety of data collection tools that included a questionnaire, an interview and an observation schedule. The interview was an introspective, qualitative data collecting method, while the observation schedule was both a quantitative and qualitative data collecting method. I used interview because as Bell (1999) suggests, "The interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings"(135). On the other hand interviews have their disadvantages, which can be subjectivity which made me think of questionnaires also. I included a questionnaire because I thought that some students might not want to say the truth face to face to me, they would feel more comfortable in writing without me knowing who said what.

Context

This research was conducted in a UAE girls' primary school in Fujairah. The students are from grades one to three; there are about 450 students in the school. Most students come from educated, wealthy backgrounds. Most parents came often to school to speak with their daughters' teachers about their levels. Overall, the relationship between the teacher and parents is strong.

Data Collection Considerations

Reliability

Mills (2003) defines reliability as "the consistency with which our data measures what we are attempting to measure over time"(87). In order to make data collection instruments reliable it's necessary to use triangulation, so I used more than one sort of data collection instrument. I collected qualitative and quantitative data and used introspective, complementary and intrusive techniques. I used observation schedules as both qualitative and quantitative data collecting methods.

Validity

According to Mills (2003) validity is "how we know that the data we collect accurately gauge what we are trying to measure" (77). To ensure validity I used Wolcott's

strategies (in Mills: 88).

Generalizability

As Wallace (2001) suggests “action research is different from other more conventional or traditional types of research in that it is very focused on individual or small group professional practice and is not so concerned with making general statements”(18)

Ethical Issues

Before doing anything in this action research I took permission from the school authority. The interviews and questionnaires were anonymous and so were the participants. The teacher and the students who were interviewed were informed about what I was going to do with the data.

Data Analysis

As analysis of data is a very important part of the action research process, it's also important to know your data before analyzing it. As Mills (2003) suggests, “...read and reread, listen and relisten, watch and rewatch. Get to know intimately what you have collected”(104). I also chose coding of the data, which is defined by Mills as, “the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected through the use of surveys, interviews and questionnaires,” (105). To analyze interviews and questionnaires I displayed my findings as tables to show the results of my observations.

Investigation

Questionnaire

To begin my preliminary investigation I used a questionnaire with students. Twenty-five students were given the questionnaire and the results were:

- o When asked, “For what do you use Arabic in the English classroom?” 45%of the students said that they use Arabic to clarify something for a friend or to ask for clarification, 25% of them said they use Arabic because it is easier than English while 30% said because it makes them understand more.
- o Answering the second question 70% of the students think of English as something they have to do to pass the year, 20% think of it as a subject, while only 10% think of English as a language they may need in the future.
- o However in the last question, which was “Imagine yourself in a situation in which you have to speak English to an English visitor to your house. What will you do? Why?” 80% of the students said they would speak in English because the person is a foreigner and only 20% said they would speak in Arabic because they don't know English.

The implication of this information could be to encourage the students to speak in English I should explain the activities in an easy, clear way so the students won't have to use Arabic for explanation. I should also provide situations in which the students are forced to use English.

Interview

The second data collection tool was an interview with the Supervising School Teacher (SST). In the interview she said that the students use Arabic because they don't have enough time to practice English and they use Arabic when they want to ask for something. She said the reason for that is the limited time in which the students have to practice the language which is four lessons a week. She stated that the solution to this problem is not in her hands and she did nothing about it. This would suggest that my SST had not tried anything to solve the problem.

Observation

The last data collection tool, which I used, was an observation schedule. I videotaped three lessons and in each lesson I concentrated on a different group. I noticed that:

- o The use of English was limited only to doing the task, to answering the questions, not beyond that. In other words the students didn't use English for interpersonal interactions they just used the language to do the task.
- o The students were using a lot of Arabic in a five-minute activity.
- o Arabic was spoken mostly in personal interactions and when explaining the activity.

As I compared these findings with my observations of my SST's use of Arabic I noticed that my SST used Arabic in personal interactions and communicating with the students and the students were using it for the same reasons. The only English the teacher used was in saying the information of the book, and so the only English the students used was in doing the task. As Seedhouse (1999) points out, students often focus principally on the task completion and as a result of that they sometimes produce the minimal display of linguistic output necessary to complete the task. (153)

So, I first had to be a model for the students by speaking in English most of the time. The second thing was to explain the activities in a clear simple way so that the students didn't have to use Arabic to explain to each other. The last step was to teach the students the language which they may need in doing the activity and this involved assessing the language they already have and the language they will need to complete that task and when it should be taught which I tried to do after doing the first steps.

Implementing an action plan

Providing an English model

I found from my observations that my SST was using Arabic most of the time, when interacting and communicating with the students. Therefore if the students are not used to hearing the language of communication and interaction from their teachers, how can they use it? One of the points to keep in mind is that the teacher's talk provides the main or only form of language input for children in a foreign language situation. So if we restrict our input in English to only giving them examples of the language and we don't use English for other purposes, we would be providing them with a very limited range of input. (Moon 2000: 62)

Give clear instructions

Therefore, after gaining more understanding of the first problem I looked at the second one which was students speaking Arabic to explain the activities for each other. So my second step was to think about and write the instructions. After doing this, I noticed that there were still some students using Arabic. I focused my attention on them and I found out that they were using Arabic because they were not listening to my instructions.

Getting the students' attention

This made me think of my next step in which I tried to get all the students' attention. I tried to get their attention by asking all of them to come to the front of the class. After doing this action I observed less Arabic spoken, but there was still Arabic used in explanation to each other. This use of Arabic should be expected and accepted from the students, as it is not realistic to expect them to use English 100% of the time. This agrees with what Carless' 2002 study shows (393).

Moving from words to sentences

As I was observing the students doing this activity I realized that the activity was designed so they would just say words in English, not sentences, so the next step that I had to take was to expand the activity so the students were speaking in sentences. After expanding the activity I noticed that the students were using more English in doing the task.

Using "English Practice" cards

As the results of the questionnaire show, if the students were in a situation in which they were forced to speak in English they used it, so I tried to make the situation in the classroom a situation in which the students were forced to use English. Therefore, my next step was to use one of Bassano's ideas which was giving each group of students eight cards on which was written "English Practice" (35). I used this with the students several times and I found that the students were not speaking in the lesson at all, they were just answering the questions, even when I gave them group work they were just doing the task without interacting with each other and when needed they were using body language. This led me to do interviews with the students asking them about the reasons for not speaking. Their answers varied; some said they don't have the language that they need to use in English and others said because they wanted to get the prize!

Recommendations for the future

- o The fact that personal interactions beyond the task did not occur suggests that the students didn't have the language to use. It is very important for teachers to know what the student's current language level is. Therefore the next step would be to observe the students doing group work and note down the language they have, the language that they need for the task - both the routine classroom language and task specific new language.

- o If I had the chance to carry on this action I would try to do more observations and analyze the students interactions in groups to find out the language that they need to know then try to teach it to the students.

- o After teaching the language to the students I would try to make more situations in which the students are forced to speak in English by, for example, bringing a foreign guest to read them a story, then let the students ask some questions, or ask another teacher of English from another school to come to my class as a guest and tell the students that (s)he doesn't know Arabic and ask the students to write about her life after asking her questions.

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