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The use of Native Language when teaching English Grammar to Beginners at Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN) in Guanacaste

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the use of the native language (Spanish) when teaching grammar in English language to beginners at the Universidad Técnica Nacional in Costa Rica, Guanacaste province. The purpose of this research is to analyze the students' perception about the use of the mother tongue in second language learning as it has always been a point of divergence among academic institutions and facilitators as well, and in which situations students require assistance in their mother tongue. 55 participants range ages between 17 to 37 responded to a questionnaire about their perception on their English proficiency level and about the use of Spanish when learning English. Results show that more than 65%, learners have a positive perception about the implementation of their native language (Spanish) when learning English as a foreign language for it represents a way to improve their understanding, and therefore their skills in this subject. Nevertheless, information about when to use it and the right amount of L1 is still debatable and further research will provide guidance to facilitate the whole process of learning a new language.

Keywords: education, EFL, Spanish, grammar

El uso de la Lengua Nativa en la Enseñanza de Gramática Inglesa a Estudiantes Principiantes en la Universidad Técnica Nacional (UTN) de Guanacaste

RESUMEN

El presente estudio examina el uso de la lengua materna (español) en la enseñanza de gramática en inglés a principiantes en la Universidad Técnica Nacional de Costa Rica, provincia de Guanacaste. El propósito de esta investigación es analizar la percepción de los estudiantes sobre el uso de la lengua materna en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, ya que siempre ha sido un punto de divergencia entre las instituciones académicas y los facilitadores, y en qué situaciones los estudiantes requieren ayuda en su lengua materna. 55 participantes de entre 17 y 37 años respondieron a un cuestionario sobre su percepción de su nivel de competencia en inglés y sobre el uso del español al aprender inglés. Los resultados muestran que más del 65% de los estudiantes tienen una percepción positiva sobre la implementación de su lengua materna (español) al aprender inglés como lengua extranjera, ya que representa una forma de mejorar su comprensión y, por lo tanto, sus habilidades en esta materia. Sin embargo, la información sobre cuándo utilizarlo y la cantidad adecuada de L1 aún es debatible y futuras investigaciones proporcionarán orientación para facilitar todo el proceso de aprendizaje de una nueva lengua.

Palabras clave: educación, EFL, español, gramática

INTRODUCTION

There is always controversy when it comes to the use of the native language in teaching English as a foreign language. For instance, Duff & Polio maintain that is necessary to avoid the use of the native language, thus students can benefit from maximum exposure of the target language into the classroom while some other researchers believe that the use of the mother cannot be avoided as it is an integral part of the native language user (1990, p. 154-156). Native language, mother tongue, arterial language or first language, is defined as the language a person acquires in early stages of his life because and it is the language of the family members and the way of communicating of the people that live around. Contemporary linguistics use the term L1 to refer to the native language and, L2 to refer to a second language. And even if the native speaker is exposed from a very early stage to the language, that does not mean it will be the only language the person is going to be exposed to. It is probable that the person is going to be exposed to more than that one. The simple idea of getting a language "on the mother's knee" as Bloomfield (1933, p. 43) states, suggests that it has a special place in one's life what makes almost impossible to eliminate it from any other context with a different language. That is the reason why when a person tries to acquire a new language (L2) it is a fact that the person is going to make a reference to the L1 whether conscious or unconsciously. "Our native language is like a second skin, so much a part of us we resist the idea that it is constantly changing, constantly being renewed. Though we know intellectually that the English we speak today, and the English of Shakespeare's time are very different, we tend to think of them as the same--static rather than dynamic" (Miller & Swift, 2001, p.4).

Literature Review

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Use of the Mother Tongue in Second Language Teaching

The use of the mother tongue (L1) in learning a second language (L2) is well known for teachers involved in its teaching process for it happens regularly into the classroom. Several researchers have also considered this topic relevant to explain and understand what the best way to learn a second language is. To enlist pros and cons has been the method used to oppose or agree with the use of L1 when learning L2. Therefore, it is safe to start analyzing the effectiveness of the use of L1 for teaching L2 by looking at the arguments in defense and against of it. As this topic is not something new and it is part of the daily practice, it is necessary to take a look at the different contexts in which it is presented, for instance with the students at the Universidad Tecnica Nacional in Guanacaste coursing Grammar 1 and what their reasons are to use the mother tongue in some specific situations and of course by analyzing similar data in literature.

It cannot be denied that translation was the first method to teach L2 (The Grammar Translation Method), and it has re appeared in the last two decades since researchers recognize that even when the use of this technique may diminish the exposure to the target language, they are productive when use it wisely. Few methods tried to use L1 in a systematic way. One of them is the reciprocal language teaching where students were paired together to learn each other's languages. Another one is the school two-way model where students learned English in the morning and Spanish in the afternoon. The alternate days approach, which teaches in alternation the native Pilipino and English, among others. Some of the most relevant are the Community language learning (CLL) which allows the use translation for allowing genuine L2. Plus, the Bilingual Method where the instructor reads a sentence in L2

and then gives its meaning in L2, here translating was called interpreting, and then students will repeat along.

Mehdi Ghobadi and Hadi Ghasemi (2015, pp.245-251) in a delimitation of the pros and cons of this topic. In their article called Promises and Obstacles of L1 Use in Language Classrooms: A State-of-the-Art Review, point out that it is necessary to confront this topic with theoretical arguments in its defense. The first argument is that the learning of a second language will require what the learner already knows about the language itself (Turnbull, & Arnett, 2002, pp.204-208), it means considering from meaningful learning point of view to the learner's mental structures with similar information that makes the new material easier to assimilate (Ausubel, 1963, pp. 217-221). In short, by using L2 the learners can compare and contrast the new language to the one they already have. The second argument in favor of using L1 comes from the processing theory (Ellis, 2005, pp. 305-352), which argues that connections with the first language are much more stronger than the ones in L2, thus ignoring the L1 during the process of learning a second language is to miss an important tool for the learner (Macaro, 2009, p. 37). The third argument goes as a part of the learner's identity. According to Fuller (2007, pp.105-129) second language learners feel more affiliation for the new language when there is space to use their own language as a way to recognize the importance of their first languages, besides of lowering the level of anxiety among them and increase their motivation and self-confidence. The last argument affirms that it is impossible to avoid L1 in the classroom mostly in elementary levels for it serves as giving assignments, as providing friendly environmental atmosphere and for giving feedback.

These arguments seem to have an echo in some other researches. For instance, in a research conducted by Atta Galali, Emrah Cinkara (2017, pp. 54-63) about The Use of L1 in English as a Foreign Language Classes: Insights from Iraqi Tertiary Level Students part of the English

Language Teaching Department, Education Faculty, Gaziantep University, Turkey, about 258 learners of a foreign language agreed that it is positive to use L1 when the goal is to facilitate the learning of the target language, especially for low-level learners. On the contrary, the over exposure to L1 will distract them from the learning process and will make them more dependent on it. Also, there is a close relationship with the last argument exposed above about the act that the need to use the L1 as a way to check understanding of new vocabulary and difficult concepts; mastering grammar points and, also as a way to create a bridge of cultural purposes by pointing out similarities and differences among them. Furthermore, it is closely related to the third argument for learners at Salahaddin University prefer teachers who use the L1 in their English classes since focusing in an “English’only” way of teaching is not something beneficial for them. Another study conducted about 96 students’ perceptions of the use of L1 in foreign language classes, A Private Anatolian High School Sample by Orhan Kocamana and Erdinç Aslanb (2018, pp. 179-189), concur not only with the last argument of Mehdi Ghobadi and Hadi Ghasemi, but also with the study conducted by Atta Galali, Emrah Cinkara when it affirms that students are willing to use L1 in their classes and also they want teachers who can use their mother tongue in class as well and again mostly in lower levels, it seems that upper levels prefer maximum exposure to L2. Even more, they want to use L1 for the explanation of some grammar points that need to be clarified for a better understanding and for new vocabulary. They see translation as something positive and useful for the correct meaning of the words and they accept the use of translation of words and texts. One more important aspect is that these students prefer to communicate with the instructions using the mother tongue mostly to solve problems and clarify instructions which builds good rapport among them.

Instructors Perception of the Use of the Mother Tongue when Teaching a Second Language

An additional perspective worth focus on, is the instructors' perspectives about the use of L1 when teaching a second language. In a study called Student-Teachers' Beliefs on the Use of L1 in EFL Classroom: A Global Perspective, in Australia, Muhammad Shabir (2017, pp. 45-52) it states that every day more and more teachers are using the target language except in some special situations where they do not have another choice but use L1 to help some students. This fact complements the final argument of Mehdi Ghobadi and Hadi Ghasemi (2015, pp. 245-254) when they say it is impossible to avoid the use of L1 for different reasons but one of the most important is to build rapport with the students, the same way Atta Galali, Emrah Cinkara probed in their study that there is a necessity to use the native language to clarify some meaning and to build a good relationship between learners and educators. In addition, it will reduce the level of anxiety and it will build an environment in which the learner's sociocultural background is considered important. Furthermore, teachers see translation as a good language learning activity in the same way students from the research conducted by Atta Galali, Emrah Cinkara do. For instructors in this study, L1 is necessary and beneficial to encourage students to use the target language, mostly less proficient ones, agreeing with both studies presented so far. Likewise, some other students object of studies presented in this paper statistics show that they expect the use of their mother tongues since they feel more comfortable. However, facilitators agree that the students should be expose to the target language as much as possible since the excessive use of the mother tongue could cause a negative impact in the learning process.

Reasons for Learners to Use Their Mother Tongue in Second Language Learning

In another study related to the perception of the Saudy's teachers about the use of the native language, by Bayan Al and Hashemi Al-Amir (2017, pp. 12-20), instructors agree to the use of

L1 in their classrooms and that there is not a relationship between their proficiency and the level of perception about the use of the native language. The same way the study of Muhammad Shabir (2017, pp. 45-52) indicates that teachers believe that the use of L1 should be moderated and selective in order to benefit the learning process of L2. Different aspects of the studies presented so far exhibit the necessity to build rapport and an environment that promotes the use of the target language without the anxiety levels that destroy such opportunities. The learning process occurs in a social environment one cannot forget. Thus, it is safe to say that parts in this environment collaborate between them to succeed in second language learning. Farideh Yaghobian, Moses Samuel and Marzieh Mahmoudi (2017, pp. 35-55) guided a study about the learners use of their first language in a collaborative activity to achieve the goals of the target language. The study shows that the use of L1 plays a key role in mediating activities for L2. Similarly to the rest of the studies presented in this paper, learners mostly use L1 for vocabulary, meaning related issues, to create a participative atmosphere, peer to peer assistance (high proficient student to lower proficient student) that promotes social interactions that end in improvements of the target language. Even more, this collaboration promotes more participation, more mediations that benefits the group interaction and more involvement of less proficient students. This study also shows that students use their native language to some extent, for instances when asking for instructions or requirements. Something interesting to highlight about this study is that the use of L1 does not have a connection with the quality of performance, which suggests that the use of the native language does not harm the learning process of a second language. As to the professors, this study suggest that they should consider the learners' proficiency when having them working in groups for they should not have much difference in levels since it has implications for pedagogy. To continue with the similarities between the studies presented

here, students use L1 as a part of their thinking process, as Mehdi Ghobadi and Hadi Ghasemi write in their second argument about the importance of the use of L1 in L2 learning, they produce L1 private speech to be able to solve the tasks and the linguistic problems they may encounter and also as a search process to look for the right answer. Using L1 will also lower their anxiety levels and assist them in managing the tasks more effectively most of the cases for low proficient learners. Particularly this study is important since it provides evidence that it is possible to contribute with the learning of a second language from being other mediated to self-mediated through L1 mediation.

Obstacles When Using the Mother Tongue in Second Language Learning

Even though evidence shows that the use of the mother tongue has a positive impact in the learning process of a second language, there are also some obstacles worth to be addressed. First, in order to use the mother tongue, all the students should have the same one. Second, even if all the students have the same native language, professor should moderate the use of it, so that they do not use it every time they want to solve any kind of problem they may find and interfere with the communication process. The excessive use of L1 will create more dependency and will produce less responsible students. As Turnbull and Dailey-O'Cain (2009, p. 2) state, "after all, unless it is compensated by further target-language talk, code switching reduces exposure to that all-important comprehensible input in the target language". Macaro states that L1 may be used carefully in language classroom since L1 "can enhance second language acquisition and/or proficiency better than second language exclusivity" (2009, p. 38). Advice to avoid the use of L1 in L2 learning suggests that teachers must not allow the use of L1 for common problems, only when all the rest of alternatives have failed. They use of L1 is more effective for teaching comprehension skills instead of those skills related to production. L1 should not diminish the input of L2. In sum, suggestions do not contradict the advantages

of using L1 in second language learning as all of them are stated as a part of the attention professors should consider in the language classroom.

Many instructors take for granted the avoidance of using the first language but the reasons for not doing it are not clear enough. Firstly, it was forbidden because in multilingual language classroom it was impossible for teachers to take them all into account. In this sense, the avoidance of L1 in a class with a singular first language is not justified. Secondly, the classroom should be the only place where students can act like real L2 users. In that sense and according to Vivian Cook, "The students are acting like imitation native speakers of the second language, rather than true L2 users." (2005, pp.47-61). Another argument about the use of L1 goes with the fact that the books for second language learning do not include L1 in most of the cases. Lastly, some arguments against the use of L1 into the second language learning classroom may seem more twofold. For instance, if learning a language the way it happens with children do not suppose to have a second language as backup or as a reference, why it is necessary to have it at all. Then, in order to develop a second language, the way it should be, it is not necessary to have L1 and L2 together. Conclusions about whether use the native language in second language learning are still on debate. Nevertheless, it seems that related to the teaching of grammar among some other specific topics, it will be positive to use it.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a quantitative approach which according to Creswell tests an objective theory by examining the variables and their relationship. The variables can be measured through an instrument and its data can be analyzed with an statistical course of action (2018, p. 41).

Participants

The study included 55 participants with ages ranging between 17 to 37. They have been studying English for one quarter. These groups were selected to show the necessity of using L1 in L2 learning in beginning learners. Continuous observation during the classes and the application of the questionnaire was performed by the researchers.

Data Collection

Data was collected through the use of a questionnaire (see appendix A) following guidance of Debreli¹ and Oyman (2016, pp. 148-162) and field observations made by the researchers in charge. The questionnaire contains demographic characteristics of the learners, type of graduated high-school, level of graduation, nationality, students level of proficiency in English language, starting point of the study of English, previous studies in English, level of English before entering the university, satisfaction about L2 learning and knowledge of any other language. Data was collected during three weeks at the Universidad Técnica Nacional in Liberia, Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Students

	n	%
Ages		
17 to 20	33	60.00
21 to 30	19	34.55
30 +	3	5.45
Gender		
F	34	61.82
M	15	27.27
Unknown	6	10.91

Graduation School		
Public	36	65.45
Private	1	1.82
Technical	17	30.91
Scientific	0	0.00
Unknown	1	1.82
Level of Graduation		
Low	0	0
Average	38	69,09
High	16	29.09
Unknown	1	1.82
Nationality		
Costa Rican	54	98.18
Nicaraguan	1	1.82

Information in table 1 shows that 60% of the students ages are from 17 to 20, 35,5% represents ages from 21 to 30 and the remaining percentage states for those students from 30 and up. About the gender, 61,82 % are females, 27,27% represents males and a 10,91% of them did not state their gender, therefore it is unknown. Numbers show that 65,45% of the sample students come from a public high school, 30.91% come from a technical high school and only one student comes from a private institution. Considering the level of graduation, 69,09% of the students graduated with average grades, meanwhile a 29,09% graduated in a high level and, 27.27% represents those students with low level. About the nationality, 54 students are Costa Ricans and 1 students comes from Nicaragua.

Table 2 shows aspects about the students' perception of level of proficiency in English language and their educational backgrounds and previous experience with the language.

Table 2 Students Current Perception of English Proficiency and Previous Experience

	n	%
Elementary	32	58.18
Intermediate	23	41.82
Advanced	0	0.00
Begin to Learn English		
Primary	34	61.82
Secondary	16	29.09
University	2	3.64
Other courses, INA	7	12.73
Students Perception of Level of English before University		
Beginner	39	70.91
Intermediate	15	27.27
Advanced	0	0.00
Unknown	1	1.82
Being Happy about English Language Learning		
Yes	55	100.00
No	0	0.00
Another Third Language		
Yes	2	3.64
No	53	96.36

Table 2 suggests that the student's current perception of their proficiency in English language corresponds to 58,18% for beginners, and 41,82% think they are intermediate, and no one considers himself advanced, which corresponds to the level they are into. 61,82% of the students started learning English in primary school, against a 29.09% of them who started in high school. Please notice a small percentage of 3.64 started at the university. Considering the fact that some students received previous courses, only 12,73% of them declared they

participated in courses from Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje, a public institution that teaches English as part of its programs around the country. About the student's perceptions of their level of proficiency in English language prior the university studies they are beginning, a 70,91% of them considered themselves beginners. Meanwhile, 27,27% consider themselves intermediate level, and no one advanced. When students were asked about the level of satisfaction by being able to learn English, a 100% of them responded yes, and about the use a third language only 2 students responded they know Portuguese.

Table 3 Students Perception about the use of Spanish into the EFL Classroom

	n	%
Spanish to be used in the classroom		
Yes	37	67.27
No	18	32.73
Reasons to include Spanish in L2 Learning		
Helps me to understand difficult concepts		
Yes	54	98.18
No	1	1.82
Makes learning easier and less stressing		
Yes	48	87.27
No	7	12.73
Helps me with instructions		
Yes	51	92.73
No	4	7.27
Learning is easier using my mother tongue		
Yes	31	56.36

No	24	43.64
It helps me with vocabulary		
Yes	47	85.45
No	7	12.73
Unknown	1	1.82
I feel less lost		
Yes	48	87.27
No	6	10.91
Unknown	1	1.82
To understand grammar better		
Yes	43	78.18
No	11	20.00
Unknown	1	1.82
To explain concepts or ideas		
Yes	49	89.09
No	5	9.09
Unknown	1	1.82
Preferring Professor using the mother tongue		
Always	25	45.45
Sometimes	28	50.91
Never	1	1.82
Unknown	1	1.82

Table 3 allows the analysis of the students' perception of the use of Spanish when learning English language and the reasons to do it. Similar to the study conducted by Debreli and Oyman (2016, pp. 148-162) which has been used as a reference in this case study, more than 65% agreed with the use of Spanish into the classroom. Considering the reasons to use L1 into

the language classroom with the biggest percentages of agreeing are: helps with understanding difficult concepts with a 98,18%, makes learning easier and less stressing represented with 87,27% against 12,73% who responded no; helps with instructions shows a 92,73%, 85,45% responded that it helps with vocabulary, in a similar case it helps to feel less lost with 87,27%, helps to understand grammar reveals a 78% of positive answers and finally , it helps to explain concepts of ideas with a 89,09%. On the other hand, those rubrics in the table with percentages lower than 56% are: considerations about the easiness of learning when using L1 with a 56,36% against 43,64% of students saying no. About the preferences of their teachers using the mother tongue into the classroom, 45% of the learners said “always”, 50,91% said sometimes and 1,82 which represents only one student said no. Due to the percentages obtained in regards to the use of Spanish into L2 language learning and the reasons to include it, there is a positive attitude from the students towards its use but, it is clear that it has to be with their necessity for a better understanding of L2 meaning thus they can use it correctly. Not only that, but they prefer their teachers using their mother tongue. It does not have to be with a necessity for continuous translation though few students may prefer it that way. Instead, it seems to be part of speeding the process so rules are clear to them and therefore they may use them correctly to finally deliver a proper message.

Table 4 Preference of use of Spanish Considering Different Aspects

Demographic Characteristics			Preference of use Spanish			
	n	%	Yes	No	% Yes	% No
Ages						
17 to 20	33	60.00	23	9	69.70	27.27
21 to 30	19	34.55	14	9	73.68	27.27
30 +	3	5.45	3	0	100.00	0.00

Gender						
F	34	61.82	20	14	58.82	41.18
M	15	27.27	12	3	80.00	20.00
Unkown	6	10.91	5	1	83.33	16.67
Graduation School						
Public	36	65.45	26	10	72.22	27.78
Private	1	1.82	0	1	0.00	100.00
Technical	17	30.91	11	6	64.71	35.29
Unknown	1	1.82	0	1	0.00	100.00
Level of Graduation						
Low	0	0.00	0	0		
Average	38	69.09	28	10	73.68	26.32
High	16	29.09	10	6	62.50	37.50
Unknown	1	1.82	0	1	0.00	100.00
Begin to Learn English						
Primary	34	61.82	25	9	73.53	26.47
Secondary	16	29.09	10	6	62.50	37.50
University	2	3.64	1	1	50.00	50.00
Other courses, INA	7	12.73	5	2	71.43	28.57

In table 4, preference regarding using Spanish considering aspects such as demographic characteristic, graduation school, level of graduation and the starting point of learning English language is discussed. Going deeper into the results obtained by applying the questionnaire, there is something really interesting related to the age and the preference of use of Spanish, because there is not much difference about this preference and the age of the learner. Ages between 17 and 20 states for a 69,70%; those learners from 21 to 29 years old account for a 73,68% saying yes and finally students of 30 or more with a 100% of positivism. In fact, very

similar to the study conducted by Debreli and Oyman (2016, pp. 148-162) about the students' level of preferences of Turkish to be used in EFL classrooms according to their demographic characteristics, which accounts for 63,57% of students under 20, 72,07% from 20 to 24 and, 25 and older with a 82,69%. These data is showing that the preference of the students for the use of L1 in L2 learning is not related to their ages. About the gender, there is an increment in males rather than females. 80% of the males against 58,82% of females preferring the use of Spanish. In this case study, there is no relevant information regarding the graduation school, whether public or technical, more than 64% prefer the use of L1. On the other hand, there is not a relevant difference about the use of Spanish into the classroom considering the students' perceptions about the level of graduation, actually it is very similar as it shows on table 3. Lastly, the starting point of learning English for the participants do not show any significant differences among them. Whether starting in primary, high school or at the university, there is an evident preference for the use of L1 when learning English.

Students also responded in which specific cases they would like to use Spanish to learn English, and here is average of their comments as follow:

- Only for those complex topics that are difficult to understand in English.
- When I cannot understand, and I have to ask to the professor.
- For some specific vocabulary such as idioms or technical words.
- When it is difficult to really understand something.
- To clarify something.
- To explain something new and then, practice in English.

In short, most of the students expressed something similar regarding the use of Spanish to learn the English language.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of L1 does not represent a weakness or deficiency of the learner, it is more a natural and expected process due to the relevance of the mother tongue in the life of any individual. The results show that in general, students have a positive attitude towards the use of Spanish when learning English as a way to facilitate the whole process, for instance when they need to clarify a concept, when learning new vocabulary, to receive instructions and most importantly because they need to understand grammar better. Also, students agree with their professor's use of L1 as a common or convenient spot of convergence. Further, the complexity of the topics represents an agent for the students' willingness to use their mother tongue. In this particular case, there is not a significant difference between students' background, demographic characteristics, graduation school, perception of level of graduation and the starting point of learning English for all the participants in terms of their preference of the use of L1 when learning grammar. There is a positive perception about the use of the mother tongue related to their necessity to understand better in order to use L2 correctly. The study also concludes the necessity of the students for a limited use of the mother tongue in a regular English as a foreign language classroom when the learners' linguistic background is at the basic or non-existing level. In this way, it is recommended that facilitators support their learning process by recognizing and accounting the necessities of the individuals as varied as they may be. Professors should be responsible to point out those cases that require the implementation of the mother tongue to enhance the abilities that will ultimately allow students to communicate in English. Not only that, professors should be in charge of describing specific situations in which L1 will serve as a support to learn English, to maximize rapport among themselves and to communicate the obtained results to the rest of the educational team at the university thus they can benefit and motivate beginners of this career. Let's not forget

that a facilitator who is capable to understand his students' needs should be at the top of any pedagogical program as learners' necessities are the priority. Professors who can understand their students will create a more amicable environment while increasing students' motivation. A student that is motivated is more likely to learn and comprehend, that does not mean to translate the full lesson for the students, on the contrary, it means to be able to recognize those specific moments and use them to improve class dynamics.

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