First Language Use in Foreign Language Classroom Discourse

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Abstract

The present paper draws on a subset of data from a larger project collected through COLT instrument (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995) to investigate the nature of L1 (first language) use in student/teacher’s interaction while engaged in pair/group work in real L2 (second language) classroom discourse. The study reports communicative features of pair/group work activity and the features of student/teacher interactions in which L1 appeared. It explores the use of L1 in scaffolding, private speech, and humor in the classroom in light of the reported communicative features.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Dr Zafer Bekirogullari.

Keywords: L1; Classroom discourse; L2; Iran; EFL; Pair/group work; COLT

1. Introduction

Researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) agree that input is crucial in order for successful second or foreign language (FL) acquisition to occur, that is, learners should be exposed to the target language (TL) as much as possible in order to develop their language skills. It seems that simulating an L2 (second language) environment is being universally considered a prerequisite of successful language leaning and effective language teaching (Asher, 1993; Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 1984; Halliwell & Jones, 1991; Krashen et al., 1984; Macdonald; 1993; Wong-Fillmore, 1985). By growing the notion of communication in language teaching profession, classroom activities have shifted from individual exercises to pair/group work oriented activities. Long and Porter (1985) put forward five pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in the classroom. They believe that pair/group work activity increases the quantity of language input, improves students’ talk quality, individualizes instruction, creates positive classroom atmosphere, and improves students’ motivation. Besides the previous research arguments they also provide a psycholinguistic rationale to the benefits of group work in the classroom (pp. 207-225).

The current research in the last decade or two shares the view that L1 (first language) has a role in the second or foreign language classroom discourse (Atkinson, 1993; Cook, 2001; Garcia, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Macaro, 1997). Stern (1992) sees the use of L1 as a “natural psychological process in second language development” (p.

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There seems to be emerging consensus in language teaching methodology and second language research in favor of the use of L1 in the language classroom. However, from a practical perspective, language teachers are concerned about the students’ overuse of L1 in pair/group work activities. In language classrooms in which students share the same L1, teachers complain that students resort to their L1 when they are in pairs or groups. Since teachers feel that students will use their L1, sometimes they are reluctant to use group work (Brooks & Donato, 1994).

Several researchers reported the amount of L1 use and different functions for the use of L1 in pair/group work activities (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Wiggleworth, 2003; Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Studying five pairs of Spanish learners, Anton & DiCamilla (1998) explored the role of L1 in scaffolding. Within the same framework, Storch & Wiggleworth (2003) studied 12 pairs of university ESL students. They focused the study on six pairs with the shared L1. Their participants completed a text reconstruction task and a short joint composition task. Analyzing the recorded student talk, they postulate that the learners may use L1 to extend their zone of proximal development (in vygotskian term). Another study by Storch and Aldosari (2010) investigated the impact of learner proficiency pairing and task type on the amount of L1 use in 15 pairs. The pairs in three proficiency levels completed jigsaw, composition and text editing tasks. The results showed “a modest use of L1 in pair work activity and that task type had a greater impact on the amount of L1 used than proficiency pairing. L1 was mainly used for the purpose of task management and to facilitate deliberations over vocabulary” (p. 355). To the best of my knowledge, the interactional features of teacher and student’s use of L1 in pair/group work has not the focus of the research works in this area.

The literature on the use of L1 in pair/group work has focused on the amount and functions of L1 or studied the impact of other factors such as proficiency or task type on the use of L1. However, a number of important issues including communicative features of pair/group work interactions in which L1 occurs have been underestimated. Besides, most of the studies in this area have been conducted under laboratory or other manipulated conditions (e.g. Swain & Lapkins, 2000; Storch & Wiggleworth, 2003). The present study investigates the communicative features of the use of L1 in student/teacher’s interaction in pair/group work within real classroom discourse.

2. Method

This study uses a subset of data collected for a larger project on the use of L1 in EFL classroom discourse. The study was designed to investigate the use of L1 in classroom discourse while the present article limits the inquiry to the analysis of the data regarding pair/group work activities. This limitation allows a deeper insight into the use of L1 in pair/group work activity as one of the major activities in communicative EFL classroom.

The data was collected through observation and recorded discourse of a beginning EFL adult classroom (N=16) at GLI (a pseudo acronym of the name of the language institute) located in Qazvin, Iran. Classroom discourse was coded using COLT instrument (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995). Ten sessions of the class was coded using COLT (part A) in real time observation to record the activities in which L1 occurred. The researcher role here was that of participant observer meaning that the participants were aware of being studied but there was no interaction between the researcher and the participants. The audio recorded data from the observed sessions was transcribed. The episodes of pair and group work activities in which L1 (that varied in length from a single word to several turns) occurred were extracted. Teacher and students’ L1 turns were coded in COLT (part B) to investigate the use of L1 in student-teacher verbal interactions. To check for inter-rater reliability, the first four sessions were independently coded by the researcher and a colleague with expertise in the field. The inter-rater reliability was 88%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted in light of COLT observation scheme (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995).

3. Findings

The quantitative analysis of the data showed that the students used more L1 (14 turns) in pair/group work activity than the teacher (9 turns). However, the proportion of students’ use of L1 in pair/group work activities (5% of all student L1 turns) was approximately equal to the proportion of teacher’s use of L1 in this activity (4% of all teacher L1 turns). Table 1 presents the major communicative features of pair/group work activities in which L1 occurred.
**Table 1** Major features of pair/group work activities in which L1 occurred

| Major features                      |
|-------------------------------------|
| participant orientation | content | content control | topic | student modality | material        |
| group(same task)             | discourse | teacher-text     | narrow | speaking/listening | extended L2-NNS |

The participant orientation column shows that the students used L1 in groups while they were working on the same task. From language oriented categories (form, discourse, sociolinguistic and function) and management oriented categories (discipline, and procedure) of COLT, the focus of the content was on discourse. This content was predominantly controlled by teacher or text. Students had control over the content in 37.5% of group work activities. In all group work activities in which L1 appeared, the topic of discourse was narrow (topics which refer to the classroom and the students’ immediate environment and experience) rather than broad (topics going well beyond the classroom and immediate environment). As the above table shows the material was in L2, extended in length and designed for non native language learners.

Table 2 highlights the major features of students and teacher’s L1 talk in pair/group work activity. Regarding student discourse initiation (defined as self initiated and non elicited student turns) 28.5 percent of student L1 turns in pair/group work activities initiated a discourse. In giving and requesting information students and the teacher’s use of L1 had different features. Student’s use of L1 was featured as genuine request (the answer is not known in advance to the questioner) while L1 was used in pseudo requests (to which the speaker already knows the answer) in teacher turns. The following excerpt of classroom discourse (Extract 1) illustrates a discourse initiating student turn in a pair/group work activity on telling time.

**Extract 1**

Student: *faghat vaseh nim sa’i half miarim?* [Do we use half just for thirty minutes?]

Teacher: yes, half

Extract 1 is a part of student-teacher interaction in a pair work activity in the ninth observed session. Students were working on telling time when Student 1 asked a genuine question: *faghat vaseh nim sa’i half miarim?* [do we use half just for thirty minutes?] She knew the meaning of the word (half) yet she asked this question to ensure the accuracy of the word usage. Most genuine requests for information in pair/group work activities were to request meaning or an explanation for the usage.

**Table 2** Major features of teacher/student L1 interaction in pair/group work activity

| Major features                      |
|-------------------------------------|
| Discourse initiation | Giving information | Request information | Sustained speech | Reaction | Form restriction | Incorporation |
| student                   | 4 (28.5%)           | unpredictable        | genuine          | minimal   | unrestricted    | paraphrase    |

The following episode of teacher and student interaction (Extract 2) highlights teacher’s reaction to student’s utterance and incorporation of student/teacher utterances while using L1.

**Extract 2**

Teacher: *ino be engelisi chi migan?* [What’s this called in English?]

Student: pencil

Teacher: *migan pencil,* what’s this called in English? *ba’d az partneret miporsi,* how do you spell scarf? how do
you spell pencil? [It is called pencil, what’s this called in English? Then you ask your partner, how do
despell scarf? How do you spell pencil?]

In this episode, while the students were practicing in groups of three, the teacher approached one of the groups to help them with the procedure for doing the group work. She knew that the word “pencil” was known to all students, yet she asked: “ino be engelisi chi migan” [what’s this called in English?] to elicit the desired answer. In fact this answer was needed for proceeding to the spelling stage. Then she explained the procedure of the activity. Most of the requests for information by teacher in pair/group work activities were pseudo requests for information.

Another significant point was observed in students and teacher’s reaction to preceding utterance(s). As can be seen in table 2, when students/teacher used L1 in reaction to the preceding utterance, it was predominantly on the message rather than form. The second teacher turn in this extract (Extract 2) shows the teacher’s reaction to the student’s utterance. In this turn, the teacher paraphrased the student’s utterance by repeating the student’s answer and adding a word from L1, “migan pencil.” [It’s called pencil]. As shown in table 2 the dominant incorporation of student’s utterances in teacher turns was recorded as paraphrase. Extract 3 illustrates how a student used L1 to paraphrase the teacher’s utterance. In this example, a student paraphrased the teacher’s question by adding L1 (spellesh konam). This use of L1 occurred in private speech (self talk), when learners needed to review the teacher’s question before answering.

Extract 3
Teacher: what's this called in English?
Student: book
Teacher: How do you spell book?
Student: spellesh konam, B.O.O.K [I spell it, B.O.O.K]
Teacher: Ok got it, practice.

Extract 4 (below) illustrates another case of student’s reaction to message. In this episode, students were working on a conversation practice in groups of three. In this conversation, a waiter (Student 1) was searching for the owner of a wallet (Student 3). Showing a red wallet to Student 2 and Student 3 she asked if the wallet belonged to them.

Extract 4
Student 1: is this your wallet?
Student 2: No it isn't it's her wallet.
Student 1: is this your wallet?
Student 3: let me see, yes it is.
Student 2: na, in ,male maneh. [No, this is mine.]

The conversation ended in the penultimate turn when Student 3 found her wallet. As the last turn of this episode shows, Student 2 reacted to Student 3’s response and insisted that the wallet was hers. From the rising tone of voice, it was obvious that Student 2 reacted to Student 3’s response just to make fun. This episode was followed by a burst of laughter.

4. Discussion

The relative low use of L1 in pair/group work by students (5%) and the teacher (4%) confirms the findings of Storch and Aldosari (2010) in the context of Saudi Arabia as they found moderate use of L1 in pair/group work activity, although they used a different calculation process. It is worth mentioning that neither the students nor the teacher used L1 off task in pair/group work. This can be due to the communicative nature of this type of activity. Classroom observation revealed that in pair/group work activities (compared with other classroom activities) students were more involved in using L2. However they used L1 naturally for different purposes. In each pair/group work activity, the L1 use was limited to some groups and the individualized instruction of group work (Long & Porter, 1983) helped the teacher to provide individualized scaffolding assistance by the use of L1 (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Wiggleworth, 2003) while other groups were engaged in using L2.
The interactional features of students and the teacher’s use of L1 in pair/group work varied in terms of information request and speech length, although there were similarities as well. The fact that teacher’s use of L1 in request for information was featured as pseudo request can be explained in light of the nature of L2 classroom interaction. Long and Sato (1983) found that in L2 classroom teachers asked significantly more display questions (pseudo request for information), which request information already known by the questioner, than referential questions (genuine request for information). Therefore, one will expect more L1 to be used in teacher’s pseudo requests. Besides, it seems important to make a distinction between student and teacher’s use of L1 since the features of L1 use was different in student and teacher talk. O’Caine & Liebscher (2009) also refer to the need for such a distinction. They believe that “some of the code switches take on different meanings depending on whether the students or the teacher perform them” (p. 143).

L1 was also used in student and the teacher talk to react on the message (not the form) of the preceding utterance. This indicates that the reactions were predominately meaning oriented in pair/group work discourse. These reactions mainly incorporated to the message of preceding utterance as paraphrase in private speech (self-talk) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Studying private speech in adult language learners Brooks et al. (1997) found that learners acquiring a second language at the early stages use more L1 for mediation of thought and planning of an action. Storch and Aldosari (2010) also reported the use of L1 in private speech as vocabulary deliberation. Previous research has shown that the amount of classroom interaction is affected by factors such as repeated questions, low language proficiency, and limiting the class to the textbook (Shomoossi, 2004). Most of the pair/group work activities observed in the present research were short dialogues which limited the class to the textbook and were practiced in low proficiency pairs/groups over and over again. Consequently, after a few minutes of practice the atmosphere became boring for the learners. To relieve this boredom, some researchers encourage teachers to use humor in the classroom to help learners to create a comfortable atmosphere, to create bonds among classmates, to raise interest and to make learning more enjoyable (Bell, 2009). However, this remedy cannot be used in pair/group work since the predominant participant organization is not teacher-student. Therefore, whenever possible, students used L1 to create humor and boost the atmosphere in the group.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the communicative features of L1 use in real classroom pair/group work. Specifically the analysis presented in this study (using COLT observation scheme) showed that the use of L1 in L2 classroom can be interpreted in light of the features of the classroom activity and student/teacher’s interaction. On theoretical level, it is hoped that this study contribute to the research on the use of L1 by providing insight into the nature of pair/group work and student/ teacher’s verbal interaction during real classroom communication. Besides, this study confirms the findings of previous research such as Storch & Aldosari (2010) who found moderate use of L1 in group work activity. Conducting a study on classroom code switching Hancock (1997) asserted that teachers shouldn’t be worried about the quantity of the target language that learners use in group work because not all cases of L1 use will be equally accessible to remedy. He suggested the teachers use awareness- raising activities to persuade the learners to use the target language instead; However, the findings of the present study showed that not all uses of L1 needs a remedy since in real classroom discourse, when L1 is used naturally (i.e. private speech, or humor) the features of the activity or verbal interaction invites the L1 for a specific function.

Acknowledgements

This paper used a subset of data from a larger project funded by a devolved research grant from the University of Malaya, and I am grateful for their assistance in carrying out the project. I also wish to thank Prof. Dr Moses Samuel for his encouragement and advice.

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