

THE STUDY OF MOTHER TONGUE USE IN COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This study is undertaken to find out the features of “teachers” language choice in College English classrooms .It aims at describing teachers practice in Chinese use ,focusing on related issues of “how much” , “ when ” and “ why ” . The findings of this study reveal that Chinese is widely used by teachers in the CE classroom . A tendency towards language use in various contexts is found ,i .e . teachers are more likely to use Chinese in some contexts . The data from both interviews and the questionnaire survey identifies Chinese efficiency and the students English ability as the most significant factors influencing teachers language choice . Based on discussions about the possible explanation for the findings ,pedagogical implications are drawn .

Key words

college English teaching ;language choice ;Chinese use

1 . Introduction

Classroom language has been a heavily researched area for applied linguists in the past two decades , and teacher talk ,in particular ,has unavoidably been the focus of many studies because it constitutes the whole or nearly whole body of teaching . What and how the teacher says especially in the foreign and second language (FL /SL) classroom bears great importance in that it is related to not only effective management of the classroom but also the learning and acquisition process . Polio & Duff (1994) justify classroom research and the analysis of teacher talk saying that what is going on in the classroom is of critical importance for FL students because “ the classroom is often the students sole source of FL input (and output) ” . One of the most deeply held beliefs among ESL /EFL teachers is that the exclusive use of English is the preferable practice in the classroom . However ,this belief began to be questioned since 1980s . Opposition to excluding the L1 from the classroom is to be found in a broad scope . Many researchers have explored into the potential role of the L1 .

In Chinese context ,English is learned as a foreign language . Students from both middle schools and universities are required to learn it through formal instruction . English has become one of the most important subjects in Chinese education . A large population and a wide range of researching possibilities call for detailed studies .

2 . Literature Review

Auerbach (1993) presents evidence from both research and practice perspectives supporting use of the native language in the ESL classroom for students at and beyond the beginning levels as well . She states that bilingual instruction (i .e . utilizing both languages within one class) benefits the learners in more than one way . Atkinson (1987) enumerates advantages of mother tongue use in terms of learner preference ,humanistic consideration and time efficiency . Cook (2001) suggests the L1 can be used when explaining grammar ,organizing tasks ,disciplining students and implementing tests . Butzkamm (2003) is

one of those who strongly oppose the exclusion of the mother tongue in the FL classroom . He argues that the mother tongue ,as a cognitive and pedagogical resource ,is the greatest asset people bring to the task of FL learning .

Apart from the studies that expound TL and L1 use from theoretical point of view ,fruitful attempts have also been made to provide empirical evidence for this issue . Some empirical studies (Harbord 1992 ; Macaro 1995 ; Macaro 2001 ; Schweers 1999) are focused on how much ,in which contexts and for what purposes the L1 is used ,and the related factors influencing TL and L1 use have also aroused researchers interest . Duff & Polio (1990) and Levine (2003) reported the students beliefs and attitudes towards the TL or L1 use in their classroom . Tan (2005) specialized in practices in Communicative Language Teaching ,claiming that code switching between L1 and L2 is part of natural acquisition rather than undesirable . In his study ,the majority of the students would ask the teacher to explain grammar rules and meanings of words in their L1 . He then concludes that it is a misconception considering that the mother tongue has no place in the classroom .

Language use in the FL classroom has also drawn Chinese researchers attention . Some of them focused on theoretical justification of the positive role of the mother tongue (e.g . Sun & Yao 1997 ; Tang 2003 ; Zhou & Mao 2006) ; while others conducted empirical studies producing qualitative results . He (2001) observed 35 teachers from ten institutions examining the practice opportunities in CE classrooms . He reported that only ten percent of the teachers used almost exclusively English throughout the lessons . Bo (2007) explored code switching in university EFL classrooms and found that English -Chinese switching was prevalent . Similarly ,as the theoretical studies advocate ,most of the empirical studies reported mother tongue use in ministering the class ,grammar and words instruction ,and several other contexts .

This study seeks to find out the features of teachers language choice in the university level English classroom for non -English majors¹ ,and incorporates teachers proficiency in the design . It also provides possible explanations for the reported behavior of the teachers and presents pedagogical implications drawn from this study and the literature as well . The research questions to be addressed in the study are the following :How much Chinese is typically used on the part of teacher in CE classrooms ? When does the teacher tend to use Chinese in the classroom ? And what are factors that affect the teacher s language use ?

3 . Methodology

This study employs a questionnaire survey combined with observation and interviews to describe and analyze mother tongue use on the part of teacher in the CE classroom .

3 .1 Participants

The target population of this study was CE teachers from Jilin University . 145 teachers were involved in the questionnaire survey . The years of professional teaching among them varied greatly from less than one year to more than 10 years . Their education background also differed . A sample of 13 teachers was chosen as the subjects of the classroom observation and interviews . They were selected simply for convenience . First ,their classtime was scheduled when the author was free so that the author could go to observe the class personally . Second ,10 of them were teachers from the college district where the author belongs and the other three were recommended by the author s friends . All of them were very cooperative in the interview .

3 .2 Instruments

Classroom observation ,unstructured interview and a questionnaire were used in this study .

Questionnaire

The Use of Chinese in the CE Classroom Questionnaire was self devised and presented in English (see Appendix) . The items were partly referred to the literature addressing the issue of TL /L1 use in the foreign language classroom (i.e . Atkinson 1987 ; Auerbach 1993 ; Cook 2001 ; Levine 2003 ; Polio & Duff 1994 ; Schweers 1999 ; Turnbull & Arnett 2002) and partly based on classroom observation and interviews with the 13 teachers . Upon completion of the initial questionnaire ,a pilot study was done among eight

CE teachers who were chosen for convenience . According to their suggestion the form of the questionnaire was revised . An item which was considered confusing was deleted from the final version . The data from the pilot study will be discussed together with the main study .

Classroom Observation and Interview

Two forty five -minute sessions of each selected class were observed by the author and the teacher s verbal behavior was recorded in broad outline . An observation form was filled out documenting the number and grade of students ,teaching content ,classroom procedures ,characteristics of the teaching style and an estimate on the amount of Chinese use .Interviews were done im mediately after the class and lasted for fifteen to twenty minutes . The informants were asked to provide their personal information and to answer some questions which were based on features of the teacher s verbal behavior observed .

3.3 Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 11 .5 was used in the study to analyze the questionnaire data . First ,reliability analysis was run to test the internal consistency of the questionnaire items (Table 1) . Descriptive analyses were carried out to present frequency ,mean ,median ,mode and standard deviation of the data .

Table 1 . Reliability analysis —Scale (Alpha)

	Contexts of Chinese use	Reasons of Using Chinese
N of cases	131	145
N of items	13	6
Mean	2 .3441	2 .5943
Alpha	.8417	.6446

Table 2 . Observed participants

Amount of Chinese use	A lot	Some	A little	Never
Participants	Teacher A ,B ,C ,D ,E	Teacher F ,G ,H ,I	Teacher J ,K ,L	Teacher M

The author measured the amount of Chinese used in each observed class by deciding what language was the major means of communication . The 13 participants were thus classified into four groups according to the amount of Chinese used in their class and were referred to anonymously as Teacher A , B ,C ,M (Table 2) .

3.4 Limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be noted . First ,the sample was restricted within one key university .It could not fully represent the whole population of CEteachers . To portray a full picture of CEteaching in China ,teachers from different colleges and universities need to be involved . Second , the nominal categories “ a lot ” , “ some ” , “ very little ” ,and “ never ” are relative and may capture actual language use by teachers less accurately than percentages would have . In addition ,such estimations were based on individual judgment . Participants may vary in the perception of the same scale “ some ” or “ a lot ” . And then ,the author had no way to ensure the honesty and sincerity of every respondent . These problems would reduce the reliability of the results .

4 . Results and Discussion

4.1 How much Chinese is typically used on the part of teacher in CEclassrooms ?

Of the participants ,the majority (60 .7 %) claimed to use “ some ” Chinese while none of the participants “ never ” used Chinese(see Table 3) .

Of the 13 observed teachers ,five were estimated to use “ a lot ” of Chinese during the two forty five -

minutes sessions ;four used “some ” Chinese ;three resorted only “a little ”to Chinese ;and Teacher M was the only one that “never ”used Chinese throughout the whole lesson time observed . However ,when asked about his teaching practice with regard to the instructional language , he admitted that he might occasionally turn to Chinese when communicating with students about language points or background information of a text .

Table 3 . Amount of estimated Chinese use in the current CE classroom

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
A lot	17	11 .7	11 .7
Some	88	60 .7	72 .4
Very little	40	27 .6	100 .0
Total	145	100 .0	

The results of the questionnaire survey and classroom observation indicate that Chinese was widely used in the CE classroom . By and large ,the results accord with other investigations undertaken in China . He (2001)found that only ten percent of thirty five teachers from ten institutions used almost exclusively English throughout the lesson . In Wang (2003)the majority of student participants reported that Chinese was sometimes used by the teacher .

Although it is still an open issue with regard to a perfect ratio of TL and mother tongue use in the classroom ,it is safe to conclude that “a lot ” of Chinese in the CE classroom is not advisable . Atkinson (1987) ,generally in favor of L1 use ,warns against excessive dependency on it . He fears that the students might feel they have not really understood any item of the TL until it has been translated . Sun & Yao (1997) who argue “it is necessary to turn to Chinese for clarity ” (p .458) also admit that to give instructions in English has always been their endeavor .

4 .2 When does the teacher tend to use Chinese in the CE classroom ?

In Table 4 ,the 13 contexts are ordered descendingly by the mean of the responses to each context . Of the 13 given contexts ,Chinese was most frequently used when the teacher communicated with students during the break . The other four contexts in which the teacher liked to resort to the mother tongue were communicating about CET4 ,teaching grammar ,talking about administrative information ,and explaining course policy or learning strategy . Topic based or theme related discussions were reported to be the context in which least Chinese was used .

Besides the above findings ,a striking feature was noticed in the observed teachers practice ,i .e . most of them tended to repeat in Chinese what they had said in English . In the extreme case (Teacher E) ,nearly all the English utterances were followed by Chinese translation . E deemed it necessary to do so ,because in her perception the class was very poor in English .

Table 4 . Descriptive Statistics :Chinese use in specific contexts

	N	Missing	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
P2 .12	144	1	3 .09	3 .00	3	.801
P2 .13	144	1	2 .98	3 .00	3	.752
P2 .2	143	2	2 .80	3 .00	3	.801
P2 .10	142	3	2 .64	3 .00	2	.878
P2 .8	143	2	2 .62	3 .00	2	.813
P2 .1	144	1	2 .31	2 .00	2	.583
P2 .6	144	1	2 .17	2 .00	2	.845
P2 .11	145	0	2 .17	2 .00	2	.836
P2 .9	144	1	2 .14	2 .00	2	.799
P2 .4	143	2	1 .96	2 .00	2	.721

	N	Missing	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
P2.3	144	1	1.94	2.00	2	.838
P2.5	143	2	1.89	2.00	2	.873
P2.7	144	1	1.72	2.00	2	.704

N = number of cases which provided valid responses ;SD =standard deviation

It is unlikely that the variation in the frequency of Chinese use in different contexts has evolved only by accident. Rather they seem to reflect teachers' response to two instructional demands on them: one is to ensure comprehension of the teaching points and other important information; the other is to create a language environment in which the students can be exposed to the TL as much as possible. In the high-frequency of Chinese contexts such as grammar teaching and administrative information discussion, the teacher may manage to get their meaning across without so much concern with what language is used. In this case, the first demand takes upper hand and the mother tongue is obviously easier to fulfill the task especially when the students' English is "poor".

On the other hand, the low frequency of Chinese contexts provide good opportunities for exposure to English. Topic based discussions, for example, usually involve both the teacher and students. The former may act as the organizer as well as a participant who may express personal ideas and set a model of spoken English for the students to imitate during the process. Therefore Chinese is not popular in such a situation. When communicating with students about the main idea or the background of a text, most teachers would agree that it is not necessary on the part of students to recognize every word. This guarantees a leading role of English with less recourse to Chinese.

Concurrent translation indicates that the two demands are sometimes "conflicting". It seems to be a satisfactory compromise that teachers present the teaching points or other message in English first and then repeat them in Chinese. But Krashen (1985) views it as a improper use of the first language because it "discourages comprehensible input" (p.81). He argues that when concurrent translation happens, students tend to listen to the message in their own language and pay no attention to the English input. In addition, the teacher does not have to attempt to make the English message more comprehensible by using gestures or verbal modifications, since a translation is available. "There is, in other words, no need to negotiate meaning in English" (p.81).

Findings about the mother tongue use tendency in this study indicate that L1 use conditions advocated by Cook (2001) may reflect the way many language classes are actually conducted, even in the context of CE teaching in China. They also accord with what was found in Levine (2003), a continuum of descending TL use (i.e. ascending L1 use) from topic/theme based activities, to discussion of grammar and usage, to discussion of tests or other assignments. The most remarkable result of the comparison between this study and the previous ones is a similarity in grammar instruction. The preference to the students' L1 when teaching grammar is reported by most of the studies investigating TL/L1 use in the classroom (e.g. Duff & Polio 1990; Polio & Duff 1994; Sun & Yao 1997; Wang 2003).

4.3 What are factors that affect teachers' language use?

Table 5 presents the statistics of Part 3: Reasons of using Chinese. The results indicate that students' English ability was the most significant variable in teachers' verbal decision. The majority of teachers were also influenced to some extent by the concern with language efficiency and students' preference. Teachers' English proficiency appeared not to be a problem for most of them, and the temptation of the mother tongue as a comfortable choice was reported to be least influencing.

Resort to Chinese benefits the students with limited proficiency in two aspects. First it ensures comprehension so that they know what is going on. Macaro (1995) states that "less able pupils would feel lost and perhaps excluded because of a teacher's insistence on speaking English throughout the lesson" (p. 53). Second it helps lower students' affective filter (Levine 2003). Teachers have to be careful not to frustrate or bore his/her students in the classroom. Teacher C in the present study expressed such concern. She said she had to speak a lot of Chinese in the course of teaching, or else the students would

“fall asleep”. Polio and Duff (1994) also quote a statement made by a German instructor who believed that “if you want to create some sort of relaxed atmosphere I think this is hard to do in German (TL) only” (p. 318).

Most studies of cognitive processing suggest that even advanced L2 users are less efficient at absorbing information from the L2 than from the L1 (Cook 2001). There are a few situations in which a teacher might switch to Chinese for efficiency. First, when talking about grammar an explicit presentation in Chinese is effective in establishing a link between the two languages. For students of non-English majors the objective of learning grammar is to understand the rules and then produce grammatical output rather than to describe the rules or items in English. Second, the mother tongue is efficient when teaching vocabulary items. Giving the Chinese equivalent (if there is one) is the most simple and time-saving method to convey meaning of a word. Third, when the information the teacher intends to transfer is very important, Chinese can guarantee that the message is getting across.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics: Reasons of using Chinese

	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
P3.3	3.43	4.00	4	.991
P3.6	2.89	3.00	3	1.021
P3.5	2.52	3.00	3	1.125
P3.4	2.52	3.00	3	1.014
P3.1	2.17	2.00	2	.974
P3.2	2.03	2.00	1	1.030

Number of cases = 145; SD = standard deviation

5. Conclusion

The study reflects that Chinese is widely used in the CE classroom, and the amounts vary from “a lot” to “a little”. There is a tendency towards language use in various contexts, i.e. teachers are more likely to use Chinese when communicating with students during the break and about the national examination CET4, teaching grammar, talking about administrative information and explaining course policy or learning strategy, less likely to do so when explaining meaning and usage, doing follow up exercises etc., and less still when participating in topic based or theme related discussion. What's more, concurrent translation is used as a technique to enhance comprehension, for which the explanation is that the students' English is poor. Students' English ability is identified as the most significant factor influencing teachers' language use. Chinese efficiency appears to be another important factor. Although most of the participants reported that their English proficiency did not affect the language use in the classroom, lack of competence would more or less inhibit extensive use of English.

6. Pedagogical Implications

No study to date has found out the secret of L1 use in L2 teaching in light of principles governing the amount, contexts, and the way of L1 use. This unknown area sheds light on the direction of future research. For the current CE teaching it is not advisable either to claim for L2 exclusivity, or to neglect the role of the L2 while overusing the L1. Therefore, teachers should conduct research in, at least pay close attention to language use in their own classroom and examine the actual effect of different languages in specific contexts. In this section implications drawn from the findings and discussions of the present study are presented.

Firstly, teachers should accept the idea that the mother tongue serves numerous functions in the EFL classroom and make judicious use of it. We do not have to “waste classroom time just to avoid using Chinese” (Sun & Yao 1997: 458). As suggested by some researchers and revealed in this study the mother tongue can be used to highlight important information, to explain grammar rules or items, to give equivalent of an English word, and to make necessary contrasts between the two languages. In addition, Chinese contributes to a close relationship between the teacher and students. Casual talk during the break, for example, can establish a good rapport between them.

Secondly, the mother tongue should be used as a marked code (Levine 2003). English is supposed to be the basically, naturally and frequently used medium while Chinese should be used occasionally and purposefully. Some teachers may argue against this tenet on the ground that the students' English proficiency might be so limited that they could not catch up with the class conducted primarily in English. To accommodate the proficiency level of the students, a few techniques will be helpful. The first is to build up English use. Chinese and English can be both used at the beginning with the intention that Chinese will be gradually reduced as the students progress. Second, verbal modifications in the following ways may help students comprehend: 1) repeat utterances; 2) slow down the speed of discourse; 3) paraphrase; 4) simplify syntax and vocabulary; and 5) use high frequency patterns and routines which may be explicitly taught from the beginning.

Note

1. The English course taken by non-major students is known as College English (CE).

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Appendix

The Use of Chinese in the CE Classroom Questionnaire

Part 1. General estimate on the amount of Chinese use

1. How much Chinese do you typically use in the current College English classroom?

a . a lot b . some c . very little d . never

Part 2 . Chinese use in specific contexts in your current College English classroom

For the following items ,choose from

a . never b . occasionally c . often d . always e . none of the above

Do you use Chinese when

- 1 . communicating with students about meaning and usage (of words , idioms or sentences) ?
- 2 . communicating with students about grammar (verb conjugations , word order , agreement , etc .) ?
- 3 . communicating with students about the main idea , language style etc . of a reading or listening text ?
- 4 . communicating with students about foreign culture , history , etc . ?
- 5 . checking comprehension of words , idioms or sentences (e .g . by asking “ What does it mean ? ” , “ How do you understand it ? ”) ?
- 6 . communicating with students about follow up exercises of a reading or listening text ?
- 7 . doing topic based or theme related discussions with the students ?
- 8 . communicating with students about course policy , learning strategy , etc ?
- 9 . giving instructions for a task or an activity to be carried out by the students ?
- 10 . asking or giving administrative information such as timetable changes , attendance , details about tests , quizzes (e .g . the date , how much will be covered , etc .) ?
- 11 . relaxing the students (e .g . by telling a joke , chatting with them , etc .) ?
- 12 . communicating with the students during the break ?
- 13 . communicating with the students about CET4 ?

Part 3 . Reasons of using Chinese

For the following items ,choose from

- a . This statement is never or almost never true of me .
- b . This statement is usually not true of me .
- c . This statement is somewhat true of me .
- d . This statement is usually true of me .
- e . This statement is completely or almost completely true of me .

I use Chinese because

- 1 . I am not proficient enough to get my meaning across in English .
- 2 . I feel more comfortable than I do English .
- 3 . my students are not proficient enough to understand my English .
- 4 . the students prefer to be spoken to in Chinese .
- 5 . it is time saving to do so .
- 6 . Chinese is more effective than English in conveying information .

(...continued from p .66)

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