Using Chinese as L1 in Secondary English as a Foreign Language Classrooms: Does it Matter?

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Abstract

Whether L1 (the first language) should be used in English (as the second or foreign language) classrooms has long been a controversial issue. In the United States, much of this work has focused on French or Spanish as a foreign language teaching and learning. In the context of English as a foreign language, research has focused on adults and primary school students. This literature review considers this question in the context of Chinese as L1 and secondary EFL classrooms. Our review suggests that the use of Chinese serves several supportive functions and that, despite the insistence on strong English-only policies, teachers and students actively use Chinese to enhance their language teaching and learning experiences.

1 Introduction

Due to internationalization and globalization, English language learning has become a high priority in countries around the world. As a major lingua franca, English is currently taught as a foreign language in elementary and secondary schools around the world. Similar to other countries, the government of China has prioritized the development of English language proficiency through primary and secondary schooling. According to the New English Curriculum Standards for Chinese Primary and Middle Schools promulgated by the Minster of Education of China (2011), new English curriculum should not only help students learn English but develop their ability of language use, improve their cultural and language awareness, and boost their learning motivation and confidence. The call for enhanced English language learning comes in an era characterized by what has been termed 'the multilingual turn' (May, 2000). The multilingual turn centers English language learning as integral to the process

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of becoming multilingual and recognizes the important role that students' home languages (HLs) play in learning other languages (de Jong, 2020). Increasingly, scholars refer to the dynamic and holistic nature of bilingualism as 'translanguaging' (García & Li, 2014). Cenoz and Gorter (2020) use the term 'pedagogical translanguaging' to reflect "intentional instructional strategies that integrate two or more languages and aim at the development of the multilingual repertoire as well as metalinguistic and language awareness (p. 300)."

Although this perspective has received significant traction in work with indigenous students, immigrant children, children of immigrants, and other heritage language speakers, the practice of using multiple languages for teaching in the English as an international or foreign language classroom is still more controversial. In the latter context, the time-on-task (maximizing exposure) argument still dominates and informs practices. English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers are still expected to provide a learning environment where English is taught through English only. Students and teachers alike are expected to repress and not rely on their home languages and literacies when they enter the classroom to the point that many teachers feel guilty about using those languages (Li, 2008). While an English-only approach may be the formal policy, the reality is that students do and will bring other (language learning) experiences with them into the classroom.

There is compelling evidence that the home language and literacies are inevitably part of students' learning processes and an important resource that can support learning an additional language. In recognition of the multilingual turn, educators are beginning to shift their perspective and exploring ways that students' home languages can be leveraged in support of a holistic approach to bilingualism (de Jong, 2020). Rather than asking "should students' home languages be used or not," a more productive question has become "how can teachers strategically use students' home language (HL) resources when teaching English" (Lin, 2006). The latter question prompts ELT (English Language Teaching) teachers to consider how they might be able to *accelerate* both content and language learning when they systematically leverage students' language and literacy experiences (Ferguson, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to examine the role, functions, and impact of HL (Home Language) use in the context of secondary EFL classrooms where both teachers and learners speak Chinese (Cantonese, Taiwanese, or Mandarin). For the purpose of this review, we included both language classrooms as well as language-and-content integrated classrooms. Based on a review of 46 empirical studies (41 English language, 5 Chinese language) in both language and language-and-content programs, the article first highlights common themes in this literature: teachers' rationales for using students' home languages and discursive functions of teachers' use of Chinese in secondary EFL classrooms. It then focuses specifically on an area of research that is still emerging: studies that have examined the actual impact of home language use on students' learning. The article is not intended as an exhaustive literature review but a way of illustrating the importance of bilingual practices, even in EFL settings.

2 Teachers' Rationales for Home Language (HL) Use

Chinese EFL teachers and their students see value in bilingual practices (e.g., Gu, 2018; Tian, 2011; Wang, 2005; Wang, 2019; Wu & Lin, 2019; Yao, 2011; Zhou, 2014). Although multiple reasons emerge in the research, the use of the HL is seen as particularly valuable for increasing efficiency of instruction and access to more complex language and also content (when English instruction includes content subject matters).

Given the limited time often given to EFL, using students' HLs provides a quicker route to understand how the English language system works, i.e., providing grammar explanations in Chinese. Wang (2005) surveyed 10 teachers and 510 students with low English proficiency at a junior-secondary school in China. In this study, Chinese was used particularly to facilitate more efficient teaching of

English grammar and enhance comprehension. In a similar vein, Gu (2018) investigated teachers' use of native language (Chinese) in EFL classrooms in three middle schools in Nanjing, China. Six Chinese EFL teachers and 747 students completed questionnaires and interviews in addition to classroom observations. All six teachers used Chinese for the purpose of explaining grammar and assignments.

In addition to efficiency, EFL teachers view the use of Chinese important to provide better access to more challenging linguistic structures and conceptual knowledge. Specifically, studies show HL is used to better assist students mediate difficult text and enhance comprehension of vocabulary. Gu (2018), for example, found that teachers used Chinese to explain vocabulary and facilitate reading comprehension. In response to the pressure of content teaching and standardized exam preparation, they also found an increase in the use of Chinese in the higher grades as compared to lower grades. Other studies have similarly found that the use of HL is natural when teachers are focusing on content learning and must meet high subject matter demands (Carless, 2017; Gong, 2015; Wang, 2019; Yan, 2009). Gong (2015) explored English teachers' use of L1 (Chinese) in Neijiang No. 1 Middle School and Neijiang No. 6 Middle School. In this study, teachers utilized HL to explain and clarify difficult and complicated content and facilitate students' comprehension. Tian and Jiang (2011) found that 72% of students surveyed expressed that teachers' use of Chinese facilitated their comprehension of the English text.

For both purposes, efficiency and access, several studies indicated that HL use was seen as particularly important and helpful for students at lower English proficiency levels (Jiang, 2011; Lo, 2015; Lo & Lin, 2019; Wong, 2020; Zhu & Vanek, 2017), particularly in English-medium content-based classrooms (Lo, 2015; Lo and Lin, 2019; Wong, 2020). Lo and Lin (2019), for example, found that in schools in which students had a relatively high English proficiency, L2 was used almost exclusively and students' L1 was used occasionally to elaborate some certain concepts through relating with students' daily life. In schools with students of lower English proficiency, the HL was more frequently used to prepare students to better negotiate and construe subject knowledge. English was mainly used in the final stage of the lesson to recap, reinforce, or bridge the content knowledge discussed in HL to English academic language.

In short, the use of HL was seen as helpful and important when teachers wanted to set high expectations, be more efficient in their language instruction, and enhance access to the content learning in their classroom. This is particularly but not exclusively true when they are working with students at the beginning stages of learning English. Importantly, teachers who use the HL for these purposes do not see this as a remedial strategy but as a strategy that can accelerate and enhance their teaching and their students' access to English language and content.

3 Functions of Chinese in Secondary EFL Classrooms

Although reported rationales and actual classroom practices can diverge (Wong, 2020), observational studies confirm that teachers do use students' HLs strategically and purposefully in EFL classrooms (see also Lin, 2006; for functions of students' use of Chinese in EFL, see Lin & Wu, 2015; Wang & Wang, 2012). Classroom-based studies have identified a wide range of possible functions that bilingual practices in the EFL classroom can play and different taxonomies have emerged to describe these functions. Von Dietze and von Dietze (2007; cited in Wong, 2020) divide these functions into bottom-up (decoding text) and top-down (accessing prior knowledge and experiences) language-focused functions and condition-oriented functions, that are ways that the use of students' home languages creates optimal conditions for participation and language use. Lin (2006) distinguishes between micro-functions (classroom management and content transmission) and macro-functions (building relationships, affirming identities, making home-school connections). Li (2018) proposes a distinction between medium-oriented functions (i.e., related to language acquisition) and social functions (concerned with classroom management).

The studies included in our review confirmed other studies and showed that teachers used HLs for a wide range of functions. Teachers used Chinese for classroom management, including getting students' attention (Jiang, 2011) and indicating transitions in the lessons (Yao & Zeng, 2006; Zhu & Vanek, 2017). They also used students' HLs to enhance interaction and relationships, for example, by establishing rapport (Zhu & Vanek, 2017), showing humor (Tian & Jiang, 2011; Hu, 2013; Yao & Zeng, 2006), and encouraging participation and talk (Jiang, 2011; Wong, 2020; Zhu & Vanek, 2017).

4 Impact of Home Language (HL) Use

The previous two sections highlight common themes in the research, rationales for and strategic functions of HL use. Whether intended purpose and functional use translates into enhanced language learning is another question that warrants attention. Yet, it is often an expressed concern that the use of HL will deter students from using and learning English. This section therefore more closely examines those studies that empirically tried to ascertain the impact of HL use on English language development and content learning.

Only a few studies (Luk and Lin, 2015; Wang and Wang, 2012) included direct measures of language use or learning. Wang and Wang (2012), for example, investigated the relationship between students' bilingual practices and both quantity and quality of English output in the context of four high schools in China. They found that students' English output and use of code-switching increased as a function of task: the more open-ended higher-order thinking task generated more use of Chinese, more English language use, and more complex sentences. Students used Chinese when they could not find appropriate English vocabulary to convey the rich information the cognitively more challenging tasks required. In other words, HL use bridged students' limited English proficiency and the English proficiency needed to complete the task. As a result of encouraging bilingual practices, students were able to engage in a more challenging task and stretched their English language use, which resulted in qualitative and measurable differences.

Other studies approach the question of impact on English language and content learning indirectly by showing that bilingual practices lead to increased participation and collaboration (Lin & Lo, 2017; Liu, 2020; Wang & Wang, 2012; Wu & Lin, 2019). Increased interaction and negotiation of meaning, in turn, is assumed to lead to better English language development. In Wang and Wang (2012), female students used bilingual practices to enhance their roles and increase participation in completing a given task. The use of Cantonese in a humanities classroom increased student participation by lowering anxiety and allowed for interactions between the teacher and students to not be interrupted in support of content learning (Liu, 2020). Another mechanism by which bilingual practices support language and content learning is through its function of affirming students' multilingual identities. This identity function, in turn, can increase motivation for learning, engagement, and participation (Cummins, Hu, Markus, & Montero, 2015). Ke and Lin (2017), for example, show that this may be particularly important when students' HL includes minoritized languages. In their study of a rural junior high school English teacher (Ivy), the blending of English, Mandarin, and Min-nan was used by the teacher and encouraged for the students. The shift from monolingual to multilingual practices boosted students' confidence and motivation in learning English.

Studies that have explicitly examined changes in English language use as a result of bilingual practices point to a positive relationship to complex language, increased interaction, student participation, motivation, and engagement. Although methodologically challenging, more systematic studies are needed to help teachers and policy makers understand why bilingual practices in EFL are important and impactful.

5 Conclusion

The use of students' HLs in secondary EFL classrooms is neither a dichotomous issue nor random matter. HLs play a natural and systemic role in EFL classrooms. Rather than feeling guilty about using the HL, teachers can use students' HL to deliver their lessons more efficiently and, more importantly, to provide better access to English language and content learning. This brief review of studies in secondary EFL classrooms where Chinese is the shared HL confirms, first, teachers' and students' positive attitudes toward the use of HL and the acknowledgement of its role in English language teaching and learning. Second, the use of the HL reflects a consistent set of classroom functions that bilingual practices play in the secondary EFL classroom, including classroom management, language and content learning, and relational functions. These findings underscore that the question before us is not whether to use the HL or not but how to use it strategically and systematically (Lin, 2006; Yao & Zeng, 2006). Jiang (2011) proposes the principle " 适 时 适 量 (use it at appropriate time and do not overuse it)." These insights raise important questions about teacher preparation (how do we help EFL teachers use HL systematically in their classrooms) as well as educational policies that continue to insist on monolingual practices in the classroom.

Finally, studies suggest several mechanisms by which bilingual practices could support English language learning, such as affirming identities, increasing participation and motivation/engagement, and lowering anxiety. There is a need, however, for more studies in EFL classrooms in Chinese-language contexts that directly assess the impact of bi/multilingual practices on English language use (quantitatively and qualitatively), language learning, and content learning in those contexts where content is also a focus.

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