



STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF FIRST LANGUAGE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract:

International and domestic research makes it evident that there is an ongoing debate on the use of the first language in language teaching and it is one of the most problematic issues in foreign language classrooms. Most of the studies have been done on teachers' attitudes and the reasons behind teachers' L1 use. Yet there has been little research which has focused on students' perceptions about the use of L1. The aim of this study is to reveal students' perceptions towards the use of L1. The sample of this research consisted of ten students receiving English preparatory education at Gebze Technical University, in Turkey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students at the beginning of the term. The interview was repeated again to reveal the students' views about whether the use of the first language is welcomed or avoided and if it is welcomed, when to use and what extent to use of L1 is helpful at the end of the term. It was found out that a great majority of the preparatory students had negative perceptions of the use of the first language, Turkish in foreign language learning and highlighted minimum use of L1. Although in their previous foreign education, they used L1 a lot, they claimed that it did not benefit. They asserted that they can learn the foreign language more quickly and easily, the more they are exposed to the foreign language, in which case they begin to internalize L2. They supported this view that they do not have any chance to be exposed to the foreign language outside the classroom. Comparing their pre and post-interview, it was concluded that students' in the foreign languages department at Gebze Technical University are in favour of using the foreign language in foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, use of the first language in foreign language education, student perceptions

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1. Introduction

There are various reasons well documented in the literature for the drivers behind the embracement of English as the medium of teaching in educational settings. Though it may require a comprehensive research to cite all of them within the scope of this study, major ones include academic internationalization, future employment prospects, state-level intentions to gain competitive advantage, globalization of research and teaching, distance education (Coleman, 2006). These and other factors made English language education a major agenda all over the world. From a state-level perspective, it means policies directed at developing effective language teaching programs. From individual points of view, more and more people invest time and resources in language learning. However, there have been ongoing debates as to what are the components of an effective English language teaching program. In line with that, one major discussion in the field of ESL settings is the use of learners' mother tongue. An overview of the research indicates that there are two camps (Y. Kim & Petraki, 2009; Macaro, 2001; Tan, 2015). While the advocates of L1 use in L2 settings emphasize the potential benefits of L1 use in L2 settings, those who discourage it state that increased exposure to the target language is essential and L1 use in such settings may lead to negative consequences including transfer errors and over-reliance on L1 (Voicu, 2012).

Historically, the research in this field seems to disfavour the use of L1 in L2 settings. Sometimes referred as linguistic purism (Lin, 2006), L2-only teaching has certain roots in Krashen's input hypothesis, where comprehensible input in L2 are seen essential to successful language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). This valid theory has had important implications for practitioners, in other words, teachers of English. Isolated from wider contextual factors such as political and economic factors that also play a role in the popularity of English-only curriculums, the theoretical implications have led many teachers to discourage the use of learners' L1. This explains the reason why in the past and present, teachers cautioned and still caution the use of L1 in L2 teaching practices and curriculum, though it may not be stated explicitly, enforced an English-only approach. There is a growing body of literature which is focused on the potential beneficial use of L1 in L2 settings (Auerbach, 1993; Duff & Polio, 1990; Littlewood & Yu, 2011). The demands for bilingualism in many diverse settings for reasons outlined before seem to urge teachers and researchers to find and implement effective teaching methods. This turn led some researchers to question and reconsider the position of L1 in L2 class environments. Now, a growing body of literature challenges the dominant paradigm that L1 use is banished at all costs and outlines several benefits. Research favouring the strategic manipulation of learners' L1 for improvement of language skills indicates several benefits in practical, cognitive, sociocultural and pedagogical domains (Bhooth, Azman, & Ismail, 2014; Blackman, 2014; Calis & Dikilitas, 2012; Eldridge, 1996; Macaro, 2001; Gudykunst, 2004; Luk & Lin, 2015). As well as supporting the use of L1, research in this vein also regards the English-

only camps' assumptions groundless and unverified by empirical research (Auerbach, 1993).

Research in favour of L1 use has so far outlined several reasons why teachers employ code-switching in L2 teaching environments. The findings of the research indicate that teachers resort to L1 for classroom management issues, explaining grammar and vocabulary, building rapport between students and themselves and explaining ambiguous and difficult concepts (Sali, 2014; Sharma, 2006; García, Flores, & Woodley, 2012). It is also claimed that teachers' codeswitching between students' mother tongue and target language contributes to the contextualization of some keywords and concepts and development of metalinguistic awareness (García, O., & Wei, L, 2014). One other claim made by the researchers is that total banishment of L1 in such settings may lead students to develop negative attitudes towards L2 (Faltis & Hudelson, 1994), which stands for Krashen's affective filter (Krashen, 1985), where the basic assumption is that such an attitude serves as a hindrance to language acquisition. Such discouragement may result in anxiety, demotivation and reluctance to experiment with the language.

Another research perspective in this field suggests a more balanced approach (Tan, 2015; Turin, 2014; Lo and Lin, 2018) and indicates that further research should be directed at discovering how, when and why teachers and students resort to L1. This is a valuable approach as a thorough understanding of the underlying causes of L1 use may indeed yield insights into teachers' own practices. There are articles and dissertations available in the literature that focus on discovering these causes, which are mentioned in the literature review section of the paper in detail. For example, one of the most prominent studies on the use of L1 has been conducted by Atkinson (1987). The author claims *"the potential of mother tongue as a classroom resource is so great that its role should merit considerable attention and discussion in an attempt to develop a "Post-communicative Approach" to TEFL for adolescents and adults"*. He presents three general reasons which allow a limited native language use in the foreign language classroom: as a learner preferred strategy, as a humanistic approach, and as efficient use of time.

Putting things together, it is evident that the macro-level developments in the world made language learning and bilingualism a necessity. English in that sense serves the lingua franca or the international medium of communication; and effective teaching of it has been the main motivation for policymakers, practitioners and researchers. Among the components of what makes up the effectiveness of language teaching practices, there lies the use of L1. It seems that there are two main arguments regarding it. While one stresses out the importance of exposure to L2 as much as possible, the other challenges this and seeks to benefit from L1 in teaching L2. It is also noteworthy to point out that there is also another point of view which may be referred as the grey area, where L1 use is not totally ignored but approached with caution. This moderate perspective is intended to reveal the underlying reasons why teachers need to use L1 in their L2 practices. Considering the contributions of both camps to the field, it can be claimed that both the exposure to L2 as much as possible and potential benefits

of strategic manipulation of L1 in L2 teaching environments are important and well documented. Therefore, instead of putting efforts into rediscovering the wheel, it seems more sensible to embrace a moderate approach and try to gain insights into the underlying reasons of L1 use (Lo & Lin, 2019). Research directed at figuring out how, when, why and how much L2 is used by the teachers and how students react to their teachers' use of L1 may further our understanding of the issue (Tavares, 2015; Miri, Alibakhshi, & Mostafaei-Alaei, 2017). Instead of trying to put forward a general outline of the problem, it is a better idea to take the context into account.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The English-only Camp

Historically, the use of L1 in L2 classrooms has been undesired and except for a few methods and approaches, most theories rest upon this assumption. The use of L1 was accepted so unorthodox that policies formulated and language teaching practices adopted were based upon a linguistic purism (Lin, 2006). One way to approach this long traditional view is that Krashen's Input Hypothesis makes it clear that comprehensible input in L2 is fundamental to target language acquisition and the more input is provided the better the consequences are. One common criticism against the L1 use in L2 settings is that the former has an adverse effect on the latter, depriving learners of mechanisms to produce L2 (Turnbull & Arnett, 2002).

Another explanation for English-only teaching stems from political and economic aspects, which refer to both an uneven power balance between the imperial English and native languages and English native teachers' inability to utilize the mother tongue (Akbari, 2008). Although recent literature indicated potential benefits of L1 use in L2 settings, it seems that there is still discomfort not only by educators who actually use it in day-to-day practices but also by institutions and parents.

The justification for the exclusion of L1 in L2 classrooms rests upon Krashen's Input Hypothesis. As a part of Natural Approach, Input Hypothesis indicates that input in the target language is the most important factor for acquisition to occur, therefore, L1 use is discouraged as it reduces exposure to L2, resulting in less comprehensible input (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

In Natural Approach, instead of codeswitching, language teachers are expected to simplify the target language and make it more comprehensible. Otherwise, any use of L1 in L2 classes are believed to lead to a wasted opportunity to provide rich input for language learners (Littlewood & William, 1981). Despite a few methods allowing for limited L1 use, it seems that since the sixties and seventies, language teachers and curriculum developers have tended to distance themselves from the use of L1 in L2 settings and English exclusive teaching has become the mainstream in many schools all over the world.

Turnbull (2001), reflecting on his own experience as a teacher teaching French to his students, claims that both theoretical perspectives and empirical work are sufficient

enough to argue that the more use of target language there is, the better the chances are for students to acquire the target language.

2.2 Research Supporting the Use of L1 in L2 teaching

There is now a growing consensus as to the use of L1 in L2 settings and its positive outcomes for learners (Auerbach, 1993; Duff & Polio, 1990). Instead of superficially accepting the monolingual, English-only movement's superiority, recent research focuses on the potential benefits of using L2. Indeed, one area where more empirical research may contribute important insights into the subject matter is how and to what degree L1 should be used (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). The historical dominance of exclusive L2 use despite an occasional challenge by several teaching approaches has prevailed so far and it seems that until recently there have not been major initiatives to uncover the reasons for insistence (Blackman, 2014).

With the rise of the bilingual approach, a growing body of literature dealt with how L1 use can actually benefit the students. The proponents of bilingual approach base their claims on many diverse benefits including practical, cognitive, sociocultural and pedagogical ones (Bhooth, Azman, & Ismail, 2014; Blackman, 2014; Calis & Dikilitas, 2012; Eldridge, 1996; Macaro, 2001; Nikula & Moore, 2016).

Despite traditionally thought to be a result of bilingual speakers' lack of linguistic competence and not worthy of investigation (Nzwanga, 2000), code-switching may serve many purposes (Gudykunst, 2004) and may indeed be utilized as strategically (Tavares, 2015). While language teachers may use code-switching for all these purposes, the use of mother tongue in ESL and EFL settings for the purpose of scaffolding is a controversial subject (Tunçay, 2014). However, a large volume of research now questions the dominant paradigm of exclusive L2 use in classroom environments and points out the fact that sacrificing a valuable asset as L1 may indeed have detrimental effects on students' language learning experience. For example, several authors claim that different languages share some common skills and processing capacities, and this can be used as a strategic tool by students in that some cognitively demanding tasks can be achieved better in students' mother tongue (Luk & Lin, 2015).

One common criticism against the English-only camp is that their standpoint is based on traditionally accepted belief and assumptions, the roots of which are not scientific and verified. That is, *'the rationale used to justify English only in the classroom is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound'* (Auerbach, 1993, p. 15).

One important finding of recent research is that teachers use students' native language for classroom management purposes (Y. Kim & Petraki, 2009; Sali, 2014; Sharma, 2006). In cases of noise and lack of attention during the class, teachers often resort to L1. Findings indicate that the use of L1 in such settings serve a special discourse and are believed to convey more power and autonomy.

It is claimed that teachers' code-switching in foreign languages classrooms may help learners contextualize some keywords and concepts used extensively (García,

Flores, & Woodley, 2012), contributes to the development of metalinguistic awareness of the students (Garcia et al., 2012). Especially with lower level students who have little or no knowledge of the target language, use of L1 in reflecting differences between two languages, illustrating basic utterances with L1 can give students a head start (Cole, 1998).

Some research indicates the importance of a more balanced approach to the use of the mother tongue in L2 classes. Instead of maintaining a black or white position, some scholars in the field acknowledge the potential benefits and need to use L1 but insist that the use of L1 should be judicious in a way that students' exposure to comprehensible input to target language is not reduced (Eldridge, 1996; Koucká, 2007; Sharma, 2006).

3. Methodology

In this study, qualitative analysis was used to get a deeper insight into the students' perceptions towards the use of L1. To identify the changes in students' perceptions towards either L1 based teaching or L2 based teaching in foreign language class, a semi-structured interview was hold as a pre and post-interview with ten students as a qualitative part of the study and transcriptions were analysed regarding the education they get in 2018 and 2019 fall term at Gebze Technical University Foreign Languages Department. The interview was recorded with recorder and transcribed verbatim. Not to be affected by other students' opinions, the interview was done individually. The students who are willing to participate in the interviews are selected randomly in which the main factor in selecting the willing participants which are of high importance for achieving rich data (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 129). Lankshear and Knobble (2004) state that the interview is a useful tool to generate comprehensive information about the phenomena being studied. It can be inferred that more than any other data collection tool, an interview gives the interviewer a unique opportunity to probe for clarification and in-depth information on the related topic.

3.1. Research Questions

- 1) What are the students' perceptions towards the use of mother tongue in their EFL classroom settings?
- 2) To what extent do students' perceptions change after they get L2 mainly focused education in foreign language learning?

3.2. Participants & Setting

This study was carried out at Gebze Technical University, Kocaeli, Turkey in 2018-2019 Fall Term. The participants are comprised of A2 level class with ten students studying in Foreign Languages Department. To analyse students' perceptions deeply, ten of them were recorded randomly for the interview in order to remove the effects of any variable which can affect the outcomes of the study. All of the participants completed their

education in Turkey, with no experience of living abroad. They are enrolled in different departments at the university.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument and Procedures

Firstly, the head of the department was contacted in order to obtain consent for the study and intervention. At the beginning of the term, students filled in the demographic information form. Students who are voluntary for the interviews participated in the semi-structured interview and the researcher gained their consent.

The syllabus followed by the teachers in Foreign Languages Department at Gebze Technical University was carried out in English throughout the term. At the beginning of the term, the interview was carried out and at the end of the term, it was repeated again to reveal whether there is a change in students' perceptions towards the use of L1.

4. Results and Analysis of the Pre and Post-interviews

The main aspect of this study is the students' perceptions towards L1 use in the foreign language classroom. To be able to examine this aspect, qualitative data was analysed. As previously mentioned in the methodology part, qualitative data was gathered with a semi-structured interview which consists of five open-ended comprehensive questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data was read several times line by line and was analysed through coding into themes. Punch (2005) states that coding is the concrete activity of labeling data, which gets the data analysis underway and which continues throughout the analysis. This process enables the researcher understand how to discuss the findings by means of categorization. Frequency of each answer was also calculated to determine the important points in the study. Students' responses were compared within the group. At the end of the data analysis, main themes are drawn from the student's answers.

4.1. Analysis of the Pre and Post-Interview

In this section, the main themes of the group were revealed considering pre and post-interview categories. The themes are specified as 'the use of L1 in foreign language classroom', 'students' perceptions towards the use of L1 in foreign language classroom', 'students' reaction to the use of L2 at the end of the term' and 'effects of education system on learning L2' with analysing the transcribed data. Within these main themes, a number of sub-themes were also identified, as presented within the text.

4.1.1. The Use of L1 in the Foreign Language Classroom

Students stated that they use L1 so often. This response was emphasized four times in the pre-interview. One of the students expressed that she uses both L1 and L2 in half in the pre-interview. It was found that the students use Turkish in general rather than English in foreign language classes.

In the post-interview at the end of the term in which they get foreign language education for three months, students' answers changed in the way the use of L2 increased. This utterance was mentioned six times. Two of the students expressed that they were motivated to use L2. The amount of their using L2 increased compared to the beginning of the term. In the pre-interview students emphasized their frequency of using L1 as often. However, in the post-interview, it is clearly understood that at the end of the education they used L2 more. This increase also affects their motivation to learn the foreign language.

It is obvious that the teacher used L1 when it was vital to use at the beginning of the term. The teacher taught L2 in a usual phase of teaching; she was expected from her students to make effort to understand and use L2 accordingly which was not the case in this group as it is understood from students' answers. That is, the medium of instruction is English in a considerable amount.

Under this sub-theme, the findings for the two interviews differed. In the post-interview, students reported that through the end of the term, the teacher used L1 much less since the level of the students progressed relatively. As the learners' levels improve, the amount of L1 input decreases. There is a remarkable change in teachers' frequency of use of L1. This response was given 4 times by the students in the post interview.

It was figured out that the students use L1 but their amount decreased throughout the term, the first question is also aimed to get the reasons why students use L1. There are various reasons for students' tendency to prefer their first language in the foreign language classroom. The first reason is students' low foreign language level. Their English level is A2 and it isn't sufficient to use during the whole course. Both in pre and post-interview the most frequently uttered reason for using L1 is not having enough foreign language competence. When their foreign language capacity is not adequate to use, they prefer L1 to state themselves in a clear way. Five of the interviewees mentioned that they use their first language when they cannot properly express themselves in the foreign language and when they have difficulties in communicating with the teacher. Students use of L1 as a useful tool to compensate for the shortcomings in both comprehension and production stages. Therefore, learners can comprehend and produce the TL despite the shortcomings through using their L1.

The second reason for students' use of L1 is insufficient foreign language background. Both in pre and post-interview, this subtheme was reported thirteen times. The frequency of this utterance shows that it is one of the overriding reasons. In both interviews, the students emphasized that they did not get a proper language education before higher education. Two of the students mentioned that they graduated from vocational high school in which language education is not the focus but the technic courses and science is. They stated that they and their teachers did not attach importance to foreign language because of their department foreign language course was of secondary importance. So they neglected the foreign language courses. All the students graduated from 'science' and 'equally-weighted' departments. In high school, rote-learning which aims to memorize the subjects that will be asked in the exam for

language courses is adopted. Their emphasis is the science subjects which have more density in the university exam for their departments. Because of their background education, students did not improve their foreign language competence.

Another reason is lack of time. They stated that the course hours, twenty-four hours a week is not sufficient for low proficient learners to use the foreign language three times in pre-interview and four times in post-interview. The course hour is 40 minutes and they reported that while they are trying to use the foreign language, it is like time is going by so fast. In addition, they expressed that they did not want to take their friends' time while they were dealing with the foreign language. Because of time concerns, they felt obliged to refer to L1. They complained that they had to answer the teacher's question in a short time, the time is limited and the learners are slow and in low foreign language level. Because of time pressures, they prefer to use L1 to speed things up. It is clearly understood from students' responses about subtheme that having more time to improve their especially productive skills can result in an increase in the amount of students' use of L2. They reported that allocating more time to use the language that they learned can accelerate their learning process.

Another cause that students prefer to use L1 is students' laziness. They explained that the reason for not being able to use the foreign language is not only the deficiency in their education background but also students' fault. The students feel lazy or dilatory while they attempt to use the foreign language. They don't want to make any effort to learn and use it. They mentioned the subtheme in both interviews. In addition to laziness, anxiety is the other factor that affects students' use of L1. They feel anxious about using the foreign language because of that they skip to their first language. They hesitate whether they would make any errors in using L2. To overcome language anxiety, L1 played a mediating role. They expressed this issue in the pre-interview two times and in the post-interview they pointed out that when they learned and their level improved, the anxiety level decreased. They feel more self-confident to use L2. However, Aurbech (1993) states that L1 use reduces anxiety and enhances the effective environment for learning, takes into account socio-cultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences, and allows for learner-centred curriculum development.

Students also prefer to use L1 in studying some skills such as grammar and vocabulary. They claimed that to make grammar learning easier, they compare the structures both in L1 and in L2. Students especially the ones at low levels made use of their L1 to compare with the foreign language. It was revealed students need L1 in learning a grammar structure in English. Two of the students mention the use of L1 in grammar both in pre and post-interviews.

Learning the meaning of a new word during the lesson comprised one of the other reasons behind learners' use of mother tongue. When they memorize the words, they have to know their definition in their mother tongue to understand. Two students are in favour of using the first language in vocabulary learning. The learners stated that when Turkish is used in vocabulary teaching, they can easily remember the meaning of

the words. Although the students remember the meanings of the words well, they have problems in doing the questions in the exams; this may be the result of focusing too much on the meaning and ignoring the usage. In the pre-interview, they perceived Turkish as a valuable resource in grammar and vocabulary learning which may facilitate their learning process but in post-interview, students' opinions about using L1 in vocabulary learning changed. They stated that they are in favour of using a monolingual dictionary (English to English) to learn more words and how they are used.

In addition to vocabulary learning, students prefer to use mother tongue while talking with classmates when the context allows using such as asking the time, exchanging lesson materials and talking to each other while they are studying together as pair work. One of the students stated that they tend to use their first language while they are chatting with their friends. In pre-interview, one student expressed that at the beginning of the term; they have the tendency to use L1 primarily in group work but in post-interview L2 is preferred even in group work.

As reported above, L1 was used for various reasons by students in the classroom. As well as being used by students, it is also used by the teacher. The learner responses related to reasons for teachers' L1 use were examined with regard to their teacher's L1 use. It was found out that the teacher uses L1 for clarifying ambiguity, explaining grammar points and teaching vocabulary. The items related to the teacher's use of L1 were thematised accordingly and presented to be able to give a deeper understanding of the students' perceptions.

Teacher use L1 to clarify the subjects especially she feels that it is needed for low proficient students. 'Clarifying the subjects' theme were uttered six times, the frequency of this utterance revealed that it is one of the most frequently used reasons. The level of the classroom is A2, it means that not all the students can understand all the points taught by the teacher, there can be ambiguity and to avoid the ambiguity teacher skipped to L1 from time to time. When she wanted to be sure that the points were received by the students, she checked their comprehension and if she felt the obligation, she switched to Turkish. Also in the post-interview, students stated that teacher use L1 at the least even if their level progressed. On the other hand, they expressed this reason that students' levels are not the same, the differences among students caused to use of L1 through the end of the term, too. The teacher felt obligated to use L1, not for all students but three of the students whose levels are really low and have difficulty in catching up their friends. This finding coincides with the study of Butzkamm (2003) who discussed L1 as a tool to overcome such misunderstandings and its facilitating role for clarification of the meaning and thus, developing confidence on the part of the learners. Wilkins (1974) suggested that using learners' L1 is sometimes beneficial especially when the use of the foreign language causes confusion and ambiguity. The analysis of the students' answers of pre-interview and post-interview support the use of L1 for low-proficient learners facilitates the foreign language learning process.

The second reason or the teacher's use of L2 is explaining grammar topics. Teachers generally believed L1 had a positive effect on the learners' success in their setting because of the fact that it helps the learners to have a quicker understanding of the L2 grammar (Taşkın, 2011). This perception of teachers is also supported by Miles (2004) who claims that L1 facilitates the success of the learners rather than hinder it. The learners feel more secure when L1 is used and they become more successful.

The students' pre-interview reports demonstrated that teachers' use of L1 is useful for explaining grammatical points for low level. Further, they suggested that teachers should be realistic if the grammar topics aimed to learn cannot be comprehended, teachers should refer to their L1 background and make linguistic comparisons while teaching grammar.

To sum up, it is clear from the students' point of view that the teacher is an advocator of using the foreign language in the foreign language classroom. But she sometimes gives preference to Turkish because the level of the students is low and the students do not understand. The teacher doesn't want to pass the subject without students' understanding so; she applies Turkish from time to time.

From students' utterances, it was concluded that the teacher sometimes preferred to use L1 in vocabulary teaching. Although she didn't appreciate this use, she felt obliged to refer to L1 order to avoid some misunderstanding in vocabulary teaching. She did not give the Turkish equivalent of the words directly but after trying to explain in English or using her body language, she provided the Turkish definition of the words. She gave the Turkish equivalent of a word just for once to approve the students' answer. In the pre-interview, students reported that she preferred to clarify the meaning of the words in L1 because of a great number of unknown words in the beginning. As time passed and students had the command of the language, they started to use the monolingual dictionary, so the teacher did not feel the need for clarifying unknown vocabulary in L1 so often. In pre-interview, teacher's use of L1 in vocabulary teaching was stated seven times while in post-interview, it was reported six times.

Lastly, the teacher uses L1 to create a friendlier context especially at the beginning of the course. The teacher uses L1 to ask students about their health, their life.

4.1.2. Students' Perceptions towards the Use of L1 and L2

The last three comprehensive questions aimed to get a deeper insight into students' perceptions towards the use of L1. Students' perceptions were revealed through the analysis of the data transcribed from the pre and post- interview.

The appropriate time to use L1 was asked to students and the responses of five students were examined studiously, it was found out four students expressed L1 should be used at the time when students do not understand. In addition, five of the students answer the same question with the same answer in the post-interview. If students have difficulty in understanding the foreign language because of their low level, the teacher should give place to L1 in the foreign language classroom. After one

term education which students get through the foreign language as a main medium of instruction, students' answers did not change. Because of their previous experience, their views did not change. In the context with low foreign language level students, students considered that it is appropriate to be used. It was reported five times in pre-interview and two times in post-interview. The first language should not give preference in the classroom with students whose foreign language level is high.

Students mentioned that when the level is low, the first language can be helpful to some extent, on the other, hand it is obstructive as the level increases. This judgment was declared in both pre and post- interviews.

The first language can provide benefit for some difficult grammar topics such as relative clauses. They thought that associating L1 to L2 can be beneficial for the low proficient students to learn. Numerous language experts have discussed the relationship between learners' L1 and the L2 in terms of universal grammar. Chomsky (1976) explained that all the present languages in the world share a number of grammatical structures. Therefore, knowledge from learners L1 can be transferred into L2 acquisition. In addition, transferring knowledge from the L1 to the TL is a strategy utilized by almost all foreign language (FL) learners in most situations (Atkinson, 1987; Harbord, 1992; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1992). However, students defended the idea that first language can also hinder the learning process in some of the grammar topics which differ from the foreign language such as word order.

Use of L1 is also obstructive in learning productive skills. Students pointed out that in writing and speaking, the use of the first language prevents the improvement of productive skills. For the beginners of the foreign language, it can be accepted to use L1 to some extent but not for the other levels. It was reported two times. Unlike the results of Miles (2004) who reported that the insecure feeling in English only classroom caused slow progress in speaking skills of the learners in his study, the response of the students revealed that learners were aware of the fact that exposure to L2 is crucial for the production of the language.

Moreover, two of the participants believed that the use of L1 distracts their attention in English classes. One of them thought that using the L1 alongside the foreign language is like doing two different things at the same time, which he felt to be inappropriate and confused. Also, students have the idea that when the teacher uses L1, students tend to use L1, too. So the class is similar to the classroom in high school in which students twaddle, talk irrelevant things and disrupt the lesson.

4.1.3. Students' Reaction to the Use of L2 at the End of the Term

Students are in favour of using the foreign language a lot because they thought that they do not have any chance to be exposed to the foreign language outside the classroom. They stated that they are not exposed to L2 enough to achieve it. This view was mentioned 2 times in pre-interview and seven times in post-interview. Auerbach (1993) asserted that one assumption of English Language Teaching (ELT) is that learners acquire the foreign language more quickly and effectively the more they are exposed to

the foreign language, in which case they begin to think in the L2. Therefore, it decreases learners' dependency on the L1. The frequency of this response clearly shows that their teachers should expose students to the foreign language and four of the students argued that teachers should use only English to improve students' language skills. The more the learners hear English, and are exposed to it, the sooner they will learn and internalize the language. It is obvious that as the proficiency level of the students' increases, the need for exposing to L2 increases relatively because they do not have an opportunity to experience in native-like setting. As students' L2 exposure increases, their awareness about the importance of using L2 increases. Similarly, as students internalize the foreign language, they start to grasp L2 automatically in all skills, such as reading, writing, grammar, and speaking. Also, students' self-efficacy level increases together with the good command of English. Further, students know that the medium of instruction is English in their departments so they attach more importance to learn L2. L2 is of high importance for their academic achievement. Students mentioned that to read the articles on their majors, they have to learn L2. They are enthusiastic to learn L2 more when they achieve it. Being able to produce and understand the foreign language increases their motivation for learning L2. They are motivated by the teacher's use of English all the time.

Students also suggested that the classroom size should be proper to foreign language learning. With a great number of students, they could not find an opportunity to use L2 sufficiently. The classroom size should be smaller because in a crowded class not every student is given enough time to speak L2.

4.1.4. Effects of Education System on Learning L2

As discussed above, students claimed that their educational background affects their perceptions on foreign language learning. They graduated from Industrial Vocation High School, Science High School and Anatolian High School and Anatolia Religious High School as shown in the methodology part, Table3. In their previous education, their teachers did not attach importance to foreign language teaching because of their field of study which is science-based. Students stated that in science classes, language learning is based on memorization and exams. Therefore, students perceived that English is learned in the same way as Geography and History. The syllabus at high schools and exam types are generally grammar based. Students claimed that they are given the questions and expected to memorize them and take the exam. Accordingly, because of this emphasis on grammar, production skills such as speaking were of secondary importance. As a result, production was neglected which is highly crucial in foreign language learning. This system causes the students to develop a negative bias against learning L2. For example; it leads to fossilized habits or beliefs. To illustrate, they believe that they are inadequate saying *"I am a science student, I cannot learn English."*

They further suggested that people living abroad can use the foreign language fluently although they start to learn the language at the same age as their peers in

Turkey. All in all, they conclude that there are deficiencies in foreign language system in Turkey although students start to learn English in kindergarten.

Two of the students expressed that in high school, teachers use L1 so often that students also tend to use L1 in foreign language classrooms and using it eventually turned into a fossilized habit which is hard to break.

Another key issue the students uttered is that it is easier to grasp the foreign language when it is learned at an early age. Students can acquire better and pronounce the words well. However, when the students go beyond the critical age which is over five, the pace of language acquisition slows down.

5. Conclusion

Using mother tongue has been a controversial subject for a long time, there is disagreement about whether using it has a distracting effect or an aid on foreign language learning, when, where and how much it is to be used. The prevalent use of the foreign language has long been considered an important principle in foreign language learning. While it is believed that English as a foreign language should be the primary source of language input and output, it is also pointed out that use of L1 is a viable strategy which is frequently used in the low foreign language classrooms. This study aims to investigate the students' perceptions towards using mother tongue in foreign language learning. The findings of the study have shown that according to students, being able to learn a foreign language is possible by avoiding of L1 as far as possible and maximizing the foreign language use in the classroom. The underlying reason for this view is the medium of instruction in students' departments are 30% and 100% in the following year. So, they are in the effort of learning English. It can be inferred that the more teachers use the foreign language in a systematic way in language instruction, the better the students learn it. Teachers tend to use mother tongue for providing low achievers help during the teaching process. So teachers at Gebze Technical University need to know that they should not apt to allow the use of mother tongue all the time as students are in favour of using the foreign language. Moreover, teachers, with their own pedagogic values, justification and academic background knowledge should take into account their own context and make realistic decisions about the use of mother tongue. Learners' perceptions regarding the use of mother tongue are valuable, as they are directly involved in the learning process. The findings of the study support for some of the previous research around the world and in Turkey, but it is difficult to generalize the results for all students' perceptions because of the limited number of participants.

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