An exploratory study on the relationships between attitudes toward classroom language choice, motivation, and proficiency of EFL learners

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Abstract
Despite the growing number of empirical studies on using students’ first language in target language (TL) teaching, an issue yet to be investigated is the relationship between students’ attitude toward classroom language choice and other personal variables, such as their motivation to learn the TL and their proficiency in that language. In this study, 366 Korean undergraduate students completed a questionnaire on their attitudes toward classroom language choice and language learning motivation. A subset of these participants also took a computerized speaking test (n = 127) and submitted their scores on TOEIC (n = 123). Our analyses revealed that the participants were in favor of codeswitching when compared to their neutral attitude toward English-only in EFL classrooms. The participants who obtained a high score on the ‘Ideal L2 Self’ scale of motivation and those who were more proficient were more in favor of an English-only learning approach. It was also found that ‘Ideal L2 Self’ was a stronger predictor of students’ attitudes toward classroom language choice than their L2 proficiency level. These findings point to the importance of understanding students’ different types of L2 learning motivation, particularly ‘Ideal L2 Self’, before determining how and when to use an English-only approach.

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1. Introduction

The idea of using students’ first language (L1) when teaching a target language (TL) has been a controversial topic for both researchers and teachers (G. Cook, 2010; V. Cook, 2001). Proponents of TL-only approach believe that the approach would expose students to more TL input and interaction, thereby resulting in a better learning outcome than incorporating students’ L1 would (i.e., Absolutism in Cook, 2010). They also argue that students would be more motivated if they were placed in a TL-only environment (e.g., Macdonald, 1993). On the other hand, for those who support judicious use of L1 (e.g., Macaro, 2009), L1 serves important pedagogical functions in TL classrooms (e.g., content transmission and classroom management) (Canagarajah, 1995), and it facilitates cognitive processing when learning the TL (Jiang, 2004). They also mention that some use of L1 could sustain students’ motivation in TL classrooms (Dickson, 1996) and to engage students (de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009). Here it should be noted that proponents of TL-only instruction and those of incorporating the L1 have each drawn on

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learners’ ‘motivation’ as part of their arguments. However, their discussions have been largely based on anecdotal evidence or intuition, without adopting a clearly defined construct of ‘motivation’. Thus, they may not be able to lay solid foundations for theoretical arguments or empirical research. With motivation as a driving force behind learning TL and considering the multidimensional nature of ‘motivation’ (Dörnyei, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2014), this variable is worth further investigation.

The aforementioned theoretical arguments on the use of the L1 in TL teaching have stimulated numerous empirical studies on the issue of classroom language choice, particularly in higher education contexts. Some of these studies examined teachers’ use of L1 and TL in TL classrooms, and found that teachers in different educational contexts did use some L1 for different pedagogical purposes (e.g., Levine, 2003; van der Meij & Zhao, 2010). Other studies explored students’ attitudes toward classroom language choice and suggested that students generally appreciated teachers’ use of the L1 in the TL classrooms (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Macaro & Lee, 2013; van der Meij & Zhao, 2010). Yet, such attitudes may also correlate with their TL proficiency level (Carson & Kashira, 2012; Levine, 2003). While students’ TL proficiency level is both of theoretical interest and pedagogical importance in the issue of classroom language choice, previous attempts to explore the relationship between students’ attitudes toward classroom language choice and their proficiency level have not been systematic, in the sense that the students’ proficiency level was either ‘assumed’ or ‘self-reported’. Further research is thus necessary to look into this important variable.

To this end, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between attitudes toward classroom language choice, motivation, and proficiency of undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. By doing so, it is expected to yield important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, an investigation into the relationships among those variables can contribute to the ongoing debate over the use of the L1 in TL teaching. In particular, researchers and teachers can raise more subtle inquiries concerning learners’ attitudes toward classroom language choice and its impact on TL learning, in relation to their motivation and TL proficiency level. Practically, by relating learners’ attitudes toward classroom language choice to other variables, the findings of the present study are expected to help teaching practitioners make more informed decisions regarding their language choice in TL teaching. For example, the finding of a negative correlation between learners’ TL proficiency level and their attitudes toward the L1 use would help teaching practitioners adjust the amount of the TL input. At the same time, students who prefer TL-only instruction might be oriented towards a certain type of motivation, the finding of which would also be of great use to TL teachers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical underlying of the debate

Since the end of 19th century, the field of TL teaching has seen an anti-L1 movement (see G. Cook, 2010 for an overview), and one of the strongest arguments against the use of the L1 has been rooted in the influential ‘interactionist approach’ in second language acquisition (SLA) literature (e.g., Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996), which highlights the importance of TL input and interaction for successful TL learning. This line of research seems to imply that there should be no reference to the L1 whatsoever. In a similar vein, a wide range of educational institutions and agencies (e.g., ACTFL, 2010; Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council, 2004) also hold a rather negative view of L1 use, with the principle of ‘maximizing the TL use as much as possible’. As a result, TL teachers have been made to feel guilty whenever they have to switch to the L1 for pedagogical purposes (Copland & Neokleous, 2011). A similar position was initially adopted in the Republic of Korea, the context of the present study, in the “Teaching English in English” framework (Ministry of Education, 2000), but this position has been recently attenuated (SMOE, 2010).

The last two decades have witnessed further support for the ‘judicious’ and ‘principled’ use of the L1 (Macaro, 2009; Turnbull & Dailey-O’Cain, 2009). From the SLA perspective, the use of some L1 has been argued to make the TL input more comprehensible for learners, and this can improve the intake and facilitate TL learning (Turnbull, 2001). From a pedagogical perspective, the L1 is observed to serve various important functions in terms of content delivery, classroom management, and interaction and cultural engagement (Canagarajah, 1995). From a cognitive perspective, the L1 can facilitate students’ cognitive processing of second language (L2) and hence promote L2 learning (Jiang, 2004; Kroll, Michael, Tokowicz, & Dufour, 2002). Finally, studies based on a ‘sociocultural theory framework’ (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996) have also suggested that the L1 is an important psychological and pedagogical element for L2 learners in their discourse and learning.

An important change in the literature since 2000 is the adoption of the term codeswitching 1 (CS) to refer to the use of L1 in TL teaching. CS refers to switching between two languages in the same discourse among bilingual speakers. In sociolinguistics literature, naturalistic CS (i.e., CS used by bilinguals in naturalistic settings) has been suggested as part of the natural linguistic repertoire and as a sign of bilingual competence (Li Wei, 2007). Macaro (2014) then argues that classroom CS could be considered as legitimate as naturalistic CS, if “the participants in the discourse agree that the interaction containing the

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1 In more recent studies, another term ‘translanguaging’ has been adopted to refer to switching languages in bi/multilinguals (Garcia, Flores, & Woodley, 2012). Regarding the difference between codeswitching and translanguaging, Lewis, Jones, and Baker (2012) note that “There is clearly much overlap between [them], with the former a term from linguistics which analyses the speech of bilinguals, while translanguaging is essentially sociolinguistic, ecological, and situated” (p. 659).

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