Noticing: L1 Use in Language Classrooms

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Abstract

English language learners (ELLs) often use their first language (L1) in the English classroom, yet many teachers feel that these students are not maximizing their opportunity to learn English. While the benefits and challenges of L1 use in the classroom are not fully understood, educators are constantly looking to minimize the use of the L1 in their classrooms. With this in mind, Schmidt's (1990) Noticing hypothesis might suggest that students need to become explicitly aware of how much they are using their L1 in the classroom. As such, a pilot research study was conducted in order to understand the relationship between noticing and L1 use in the L2 classroom by videotaping students during group work in a beginning level IEP Listening and Speaking class and by allowing students to review their use of the L1. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Results indicated that while the students seemed to notice their L1 usage, actual L1 usage over time varied depending on the student. While further research is needed, the findings have the potential to influence the foreign language classroom environment by giving both teachers and students a way to recognize first language use in the classroom.

Keywords: L1 use, methods, noticing, self-awareness

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Background

Although there is much debate over how often the first language (L1) should be used in the language classroom (if at all), stating that learners never and should never use their L1 is both unrealistic and impractical (Cook, 2001; Karathanos, 2009; Levine, 2003). As such, the question then becomes how--not whether--L1 use affects the language learning process.

The ideas presented in Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which claims that one must first notice a pattern or linguistic feature in order to learn language, provides an opportunity for ELLs to decrease their L1 use. Indeed, when the idea of noticing is then translated into the language classroom, it becomes a question of whether ELLs can notice their use of the L1 and then reduce that L1 usage. Rather than teachers assuming that the students are being lazy, it is a possibility that the students truly do not realize how much they are reverting back to their L1. While proficiency level may be a factor in this use, little research has been done on this topic, and current methods for reducing L1 end in varied results. For this reason, this study seeks to understand the relationship between noticing and L1 use in the L2 classroom, an idea that has the potential to influence the foreign language classroom environment by giving both teachers and students a way to recognize first language use in the classroom.

Research Questions

This study intended to find a means to create Cook's (2001) concept of maximizing the use of the L2 rather than completely eradicate the L1. However, to what extent do these students recognize that they are using their L1? After being explicitly pointed out, will the use of L1 decrease due to the students' noticing and self-awareness as suggested by Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis and subsequent research?

Methods

This study was conducted in two sections of Level 2 Listening and Speaking classes. Four participants were used from each class and were paired with speakers of the same L1. In both classes, the instructor was present and conducted class as usual. Aside from the videotaping aspect of this study and a short discussion and replay of the video in the first experimental group session, the researchers attempted to get as close to a normal class session as possible.

Both classes were given a brief survey about their language use and were videotaped during group work for ten minutes, although speaking time for each group varied depending on student participation. In the experimental group, the students watched their video or listened to their recording for about five minutes. While doing so, students tallied the number of times they used their first language. A discussion about the importance of L2 use in the classroom followed. Afterwards, students filled out another short survey to demonstrate their self-awareness of L1 and L2 usage. The control group, however, did not get to watch the video or discuss their understanding of L1 classroom usage, nor did they receive the second survey. The second visit occurred around two weeks later to investigate whether the students were still using the L1 to the extent that they were in the first session. Both experimental and control groups were videotaped or audio recorded for another ten minutes and were given another short survey, though like the first visit, student participation, or talking time, varied. Neither class watched the video at this point. The videotapes and audio recordings were thoroughly examined by the two researchers to see if noticing and time caused any difference in L1 classroom use. Survey data was used to measure student noticing and self-awareness of L1 use.

Results

While this subset of data is small, results demonstrate a few minor trends. With regard to overall speaking patterns (both L1 and English), all experimental group students originally stated

that they "always" spoke in class (i.e., 6 on a six-point Likert scale), while Min and Liliana in the control group said the same. The other members of the control group (Wei and Sonya) answered quite positively, though. After treatment, the experimental group was given another survey, and Mona, Rasha, and Ahmad claimed that they still only spoke English, while Khalid changed his answer. Overall, however, no student answered below 4 on the six-point Likert scale.

Survey data about L1 use was also collected. Interestingly, after treatment on the first visit, all but one student (Ahmad) in the experimental group lowered his or her answer regarding L1 classroom use, though this result could be an outcome of teacher interference. Data from two weeks later in the second visit showed that Mona and Rasha felt as if they used less of their L1 than they indicated in the first survey but more than they said they used immediately after treatment. Ahmad and Khalid, however, felt that their L1 use went down significantly. Three of the control group students (Sonya, Liliana, and Wei) felt that their L1 use was the same as the first visit, while Min felt that her L1 use increased between the visits.

The surveys also looked at how the students felt about English use. The pre-treatment survey (given to both groups) illustrated that students felt that they used English quite a bit in class. In the survey given immediately after treatment, Rasha and Ahmad in the experimental group felt that they used more English than previously indicated, while the other half (Mona and Khalid) felt the opposite. In the survey given during the second visit two weeks later, Rasha and Ahmad, who in the first visit had felt that their English use was higher than previously thought, rated themselves as using less English while the other two members of the experimental group (Mona and Khalid) put the opposite. In the control group, Min and Wei rated themselves the same as the first visit, while Sonya and Liliana rated themselves one point higher. All ratings were 4 or above on the six-point Likert scale. Based on one survey question (i.e., whether the students felt that their English increased from the first to the second visit), all students felt mildly

to moderately confident that their English use increased between visits.

In addition to the survey data, the video and audio recordings were analyzed for actual time (in seconds) of L1 and of L2 use. Both pre-activity and activity discussions were included. The amount of time allocated to each section depended on the pair, as some students liked chatting--in their L1 or L2, while Min and Wei were quiet. L1 use during the pre-activity indicated that while most students were talking to each other before the activity, generally the amount of pre-activity talking decreased in the second visit. With regard to L1 usage, more students spoke in their L1 during the second visit pre-activity than during the first visit pre-activity, with Mona, Ahmad, and Khalid (experimental group) and Wei (control group) actually increasing their percentage of L1 use.

During activity data demonstrated interesting results as well. Indeed, while students generally spent less time speaking in the second activity, use of the L1 increased with the experimental group. Mona, Rasha, Ahmad, and Khalid did not use the L1 during the first activity, while they all used some (albeit small percentages) during the second activity. In the control group, Min and Wei decreased their L1 use between visits while the Sonya and Liliana did not use any L1 in either visit.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Although the study yielded varied results, it is relevant to both the PIE and language learning. The basis and literature review of the study itself illustrates that English language teachers are still searching for effective pedagogical strategies to maximize second language use in the classroom. This study offers a new method for teachers to use in their classes. However, this study does not show that this method is necessarily an effective one. On the other hand, students in the experimental group were more likely to recognize and think about their L1 use, indicating an effective treatment in that regard. In this way, this method might be somewhat

useful in getting students to recognize their L1 use. This may, with multiple treatments, lead to

minimizing L1 use. Because of the many limitations involved with this study, the researchers

intend to make adjustments and try the study in the future.

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