INVESTIGATING THE USE OF L1 IN L2 CLASSROOMS: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN TEACHING PRACTICUM

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ABSTRACT: *Introducing Action Research concept to student teachers and involving them into a process of conducting a selected action research project during their teaching practicum experience is one of my priorities when teaching Practicum 2 Course in order to help student teachers comprehend the complexities of the world of profession and offer opportunities to increase effective pedagogical practices. To achieve this objective, I selected an issue that was nominated by 12 student teachers as causing a problem on their practice and their pupils' learning. The selected issue is about the use of L1 in L2 classroom. To investigate the issue, I designed three research instruments which distributed by student teachers to collect data from a sample of 20 EFL teachers and 320 pupils from 12 classrooms in 6 public intermediate schools in Almadinah city, KSA. I analised the data and shared the findings of the project with student teachers who made future decisions regarding their L2 teaching practices and reflected upon how action research developed their recognition of the investigate issue.*

KEYWORDS: Action Research, Practicum, L1 use in L2 classroom

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a challenging profession in today's changing world. It is a career where lifelong learning and continuous development are essential elements for meeting the diverse roles and responsibilities involved. Therefore, significant attention has been given to teacher-education programs which are considered to constitute a rigorous method of providing student teachers with the knowledge, skills and experience through educational courses and practicum. The teaching practicum is a field experiences that allows student teachers to observe and participate in performing the tasks of the profession under the supervision of the program staff. It supplies student teachers with skills and enables them to apply their acquired knowledge to teaching practice.

Implementing Action Research (AR) in teaching practicum appears to be one of the most innovative approaches to educating EFL student teachers. AR is different from academic research because the questions it focuses on emerge from actual teaching or learning problems or concerns. Training EFL student teachers to implement AR in their teaching practicum is expected to help them build a basis for future professional development. Previous studies have indicated that teachers who have learned teaching methods are familiar with a method from preparation programs and are familiar with them are more likely to implement them later in their future careers (Ponte, Beijard, and Ax, 2004). Burns (2005) stated that applying AR in teacher education in the field of second language teaching served various purposes: (1) addressing and finding solution to problems occur in teaching and learning situations; (2) investigating curriculum innovations and understanding educational change processes; (3) reducing the gap between academic research findings and practical classroom practices; (4) facilitating the professional development of reflective teachers; (5) equipping teachers with

research skills to enhance their knowledge of conducting research; and enhancing the development of teacher's personal practical theories.

Statement of the Problem

In the second semester of 2016, I was the instructor of *Teaching Practicum 2* that constituted an essential course in a teacher-education program. The practicum aimed to provide EFL graduates enrolled in the program with the knowledge and skills to apply theories to practical teaching experience. This course consisted of two parts: the first, classroom practice, concerned a supervised field experience in a public school; the second, involved weekly sessions during which student teachers engaged in deep discussion about and reflection on their teaching practices. Despite the enriching experiences they may acquire when participating in practicum, student teachers face several challenges in EFL classrooms. One of my major priorities in this course was to train student teachers practically to conduct AR during their practicum experience in order to learn the skills to investigate and solve real problems that occur in school life. To achieve this, I focused on a major problem that many EFL student teachers have faced during practicum in public schools, which is the use of the mother language in EFL classrooms. I chose this problem in particular because some of my student teachers (n = 12) complained that their pupils had asked them to use L1 (Arabic) to help them understand their lessons. Their complaint began on the first day of their teaching practicum experience. They claimed that pupils did not follow their instructions or respond to them when only English was used. They attributed pupils' behavior to negative attitudes toward the L2, lack of motivation or excessive use of L1 use by in-service classroom teachers. They asked me, as a course instructor, to provide advice that helps them address this complex situation. In response, I decided to conduct an AR project in cooperation with student teachers with the aims of increasing their awareness of the situation and helping them find better ways of improving the quality of instruction. Mcmillan and Turnbull (2009) advocate AR as a means for developing teachers' awareness of their practices regarding to L1 use in L2 classroom and they recommend the implementation of personalized approaches to L1 and L2 use that should be pedagogically principled.

Nowadays, the issue of employing L1 in L2 classrooms has received a considerable research attention. The recent L2 research has investigated this issue from different perspectives, particularly the amount of L1 use and the functions of L1 in second or foreign language classrooms and language teachers' and learners' perceptions about L1 use in L2 classrooms (de la Campa & Nassaj, 2009; Levine, 2014; Mohhebi & Alavi,2014). The present AR project investigates the frequency of L1 use to fulfill purposes in L2 classroom through examining teachers' and pupils' perceptions and L2 classroom observations.

Purposes of the Project

The main purposes of this project were the following:

1. To introduce and practice the concept of AR on a problematic situation facing student teachers in TEFL.

2. To help student teachers reconise the reasons behind the problematic situation of pupils' insistence on using their native language in EFL classrooms through investigating the following:

a. The frequency of L1 use to fulfill purposes in L2 classroom from the perspectives of teachers.

b. The frequency of L1 use to fulfill purposes in L2 classroom from the perspectives of pupils.

c. The frequency of L1 use to fulfill purposes in L2 classroom from classroom observation.

3.To encourage student teachers become problem solvers and develop their future teaching practices.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

I implemented a plan that involved student teachers performing the following: (1) reviewing current literature relating to the case problem; (2) monitoring the level of the native-language use in EFL classrooms; (3) investigating EFL teachers' perceptions about the purposes of their native language use in English classrooms; and (4) examining pupils' perceptions about the purposes of their teachers' L1 use in L2 classroom.

The project utilised quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. Three instruments were developed and used about the frequency of L1 use to fulfill purposes in L2 classroom (see appendix). The first was a questionnaire that included 23 closed-ended statements that were rated on a five point Likert scale from 'always' to 'never'. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher after reviewing some related studies and was distributed by student teachers to a sample consisting of 20 EFL teachers and 320 pupils from 12 classrooms in 6 public schools in Almadinah city, Saudi Arabia. It investigated the pupils' responses regarding their teachers' frequency of native language use in English classrooms. The second instrument was structured interviews that were conducted by student teachers. All of the English teachers in the six public schools (n = 20) were asked to describe how frequently they used the native language to fulfill different purposes in language classrooms. The third instrument was observation checklist. Each student teacher was required to attend an English class twice in accompany with the me (the course instructor) and used this checklist to record how frequently the real classroom teachers used the native language while teaching English. The instruments were administrated to professionals in the field to check validity. They were also piloted on a sample of 30 pupils and 10 teachers in order to compute reliability. The data collected were analised using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was run. The reliability of the questionnaire was (.905); structured interviews (.889) and observation checklist (.857) which indicated that the instruments were highly reliable and could be implemented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I analysed the data collected from the questionnaire, structured interviews and observation checklist using SPSS. The results regarding the frequent use of L1 in L2 classrooms revealed the following distinction: the classroom observation and pupils' response to the questionnaire indicated that English teachers 'sometimes' use Arabic to fulfill different purposes in their classrooms, While the structured interviews highlighted that teachers described their L1 use in

L2 classrooms as 'rare'. Concerning the purposes for which L1 was used in L2 classroom, the top five purposes according to the ranking of the mean scores in the three instruments were as follows: for the pupils' questionnaire; they were 'to explain difficult vocabulary (M=3.5704)', 'to explain complex grammar (M=3.5333)', 'to enhance the comprehension of a text (M=3.4296)', 'to make good relationship with pupils (M=3.3407)', and 'to explain pupils'errors' (M=3.3406). For the structured interviews; they were 'to explain difficult vocabulary (M=2.7333)', 'to explain complex grammar (M=2.6000)', 'to make good relationship with students (M=2.2667)', 'to manage the classroom (M=2.1333)', and 'to provide pupils with feedback (M=2.1202)'. For the classroom observations; they were 'to explain difficult vocabulary (M=3.5402), 'to explain complex grammar (M=3.4323)', 'to enhance the comprehension of a text (M=3.4200)', 'to discuss the topic that students are going to write about'(M=3.3323), and 'to explain tasks and assignments (M=3.3222)'. It was surprising to find that the top two frequent purposes for L1 use were similar according to the analysis of the three instruments. The top two purposes were 'to provide the meaning of new difficult words' and 'to explain the complex grammatical structures'. The use of L1 to fulfill these two purposes was justified by the supporters of L1 use. Seng and Hashim (2006) believe that using L1 to teach word and patterns increases students' awareness regarding the differences between the two languages. Cook (2001) argues that L1 should be used to instruct grammar because low proficient learners posses little linguistic knowledge, so L1 enables them to construct associations between the knowledge of the two languages in their minds.

For the other purposes, the rankings of their frequency differed over the three instruments. According to the ranking of the mean scores, the two purposes for which L1 was used least also differed over the three instruments; for the questionnaire, it was 'to manage the classroom (2.8148)', and 'to provide feedback (M=2.5259)'; for interviews, it was 'to check pupils'comprehension of the lesson (M=1.8667), and 'to supply pupils with the main idea of the listening task (M=1.8000)'; for observation, it was 'to manage the classroom (M=2.6005)', and 'to provide feedback (M=2.5102)'.

At the end of the project, I shared the results with the student teachers and organized a session during which to discuss the findings. The session was also designed to provide student teachers with an opportunity to share their experiment and reflections regarding how AR facilitated their understanding of the investigated problem. The student teachers stated that AR helped them understand that L1 use in L2 classrooms is an argumentative issue that has been debated for many years, and the debate over this issue has not been settled. This allowed them to view the issue from different perspectives and clarified their misconceptions about it. For example,

using L1 in L2 classroom is discouraged by some researchers such as Krashen (1982) ad Macdonald (1993). The proponents of the L2-only classroom claimed that there is no value in L1 use and argued for the importance of supplying students with maximum opportunities to support L2 learning (Lasagabaster, 2013). They stated that students must be exposed to sufficient amount of target language input in order to develop target language proficiency better. They stated that L1 use diminishes L2 learning (Halliwell & Jones,1991), reduces students'exposure to sufficient L2- comprehensible input, increases the frequency of errors caused by L1 negative transfer, and prevents students from developing the habits of thinking in L2.

Burden (2000) argued that L2 learning mostly happens when the students are exposed to it exclusively.

However, opponents of the L2-only classroom believe that L1 use may serve as a facilitative and supportive role in L2 classroom such as facilitating communication and conveying meaning because It increases L2 comprehension, reduces stress and provides more L2 practice time. Marco (2005) argued that the avoidance of L1 use may result in increased usage of input modification such as speaking more slowly, repetition, and simplifying syntax which might bring negative effects like making the discourse less realistic. Cook (2011) found that when students are allowed to use L1 and L2 in the classroom, there is more communication and participation. Liao (2006) observed that when L1 use is not allowed, students remain silent due to their nervousness or lack of L2 competence.

Conducting AR increases student teachers'awareness of the problem investigated. They realised that pupils' requests to student teachers to use L1 was not stimulated by lack of motivation or negative attitudes towards L2 learning or culture. They also noticed that L1 use was neither systematic nor habitual in intermediate English classrooms. On the contrary, pupils felt that L1 acts as a relieving tool to pupils because it reduced the language learning anxiety, provided them with a sense of security, and increased their acceptance of the new language.

Furthermore, the student teachers recognised that teachers' occasional L1 use was justified. Intermediate stage pupils in Saudi schools are beginners and their English proficiency level is low. Consequently, teachers sometimes use L1 to facilitate comprehension of the input and increase pupils' willingness to communicate in English. When L2 is the only medium of instruction and communication, pupils occasionally remain silent and they refuse to participate due to a low L2 competency level.

After sharing the obtained results, student teachers were invited to join an open discussion and encouraged to reflect on the AR learning experience and make decisions regarding their future teaching practices. The discussion about the issue of using L1 in L2 classroom revealed that there is still controversy over L1 us. The

student teachers participated in the project expressed different opinions. For example,

some of the student teachers (n = 8) advocated the only L2 classroom and stated that:

"*Although the results of this AR project showed that the amount of L1 use in L2 classrooms was reasonable and the English teachers had their justifications regarding switching to students' native language, our teaching practices will be completely different. We will not respond to pupils' requests to use L1*".

Student teacher 1 said:

" *For Saudi students, the classroom is the only place where pupils can get exposure to L2; therefore, a language teacher must speak only English in order to maximise L2   exposure opportunities*"

Student teacher 2 said that

" *When L1 is used in teaching, it reduces students' motivation to learn a foreign language and hinders fluency and affects the learning process negatively*".

 Student teacher 3 said

" *I will never use L1 in teaching English to fulfill instructional or non-instructional purposes in my classroom since my aim of L2 teaching is to help my students achieve native-like proficiency*".

Student teacher 4 said

" *If L1 is used, pupils will get used to it and put pressure on teachers to use it whenever they have difficulty*".

On the contrary, the other group of student teachers (n=6) supported the arguments for using L1 in L2 classroom and state that " *We believe that the use of L1 in teaching L2 is not prohibited. The limited use of L1 is useful because it has cognitive, social and psychological benefits*".

Student teacher 5 stated that:

" *L1 facilitates the process of learning and enhances comprehension*".

student teacher 6 said:

"*I find that using L1 helps teachers to reduce students' anxiety and make the classroom environment friendlier*".

Student teacher 7 said:

" *I might use L1 in my L2 classroom to save the time spent in explaining abstract vocabulary and difficult grammar* ".

Student teacher 8 said:

"*L1 use should be very limited, except in some instructional situations when it is necessary*".

To conclude the discussion, I clarified to student teachers that they should be very cautious if they use L1 in L2 pedagogy. Employing L1 should be justified, otherwise it might be considered as a lack of patience or preparation on the part of teachers. Using L1 excessively should be avoided, and the value of L1 use should not be exaggerated. Student teachers should keep L1 use to the absolute minimum when things do not work and they cannot go on through. They must use L2 where possible and L1 when inevitable.

In regard to the decisions student teachers will take to improve this line of teaching in future, they suggested the following list of practices that can be employed to develop L2 pupils' proficiency and reduce pupils'insistence to use L1 in L2 pedagogy: providing a safe language environment through promoting intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, lowering anxiety levels by rewarding errors and encouraging self-correction; helping pupils to build a language community where language is practiced with peers from different cultures; teaching student teachers some learning strategies that can help them to construct language learning; integrating technology like YouTube and social media which provide great opportunities to practice authentic material.

They also reported that the AR project provided them with experience that would be difficult to acquire from educational courses or by asking the guidance of their supervisors. The processes of the AR cycle deepened their awareness of the role that L1 plays in L2 classrooms.

They realised that the main goal of the investigation was to change or modify some of the teaching practices in order to increase the effectiveness of student learning. For example, they realised that using L1 is not a problem, the problem is when and how to use it. The student teachers found that although AR equipped them with research skills, enhanced their understanding of classroom complexity, and enabled them to solve problems resulting from teaching practices, AR processes were also time consuming. Hence it is difficult for them to conduct AR in addition to the demands of their practicum.

Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX

The frequency of L1 use to fulfill purposes in English classroom		always	frequently	sometimes	rarely	never
1	To provide the meaning of new difficult words					
2	To explain the complex grammatical structures					
3	To enhance comprehension of reading text.					
4	To discuss the topic that pupils are going to write about					
5	To supply students with the main idea of a listening task					
6	To explain tasks and assignments					
7	To clarify complex ideas or concepts					
8	To check pupils' comprehension of the lesson					
9	To make sure that pupils understand questions in exams					
10	To avoid confusion.					
11	To provide them with feedback					
12	To explain their errors					
13	To give directions					
14	To give administrative information like syllabus, timetable, announcement..etc					
15	To supply them with suggestions					
16	To manage the classroom					
17	To draw their attention					
18	To encourage shy or weak pupils to participate.					
19	To add fun and humor in my class					
20	To reduce anxiety and stress					
21	To give personal comments					
22	To make good relationship with students					
23	To discuss issues irrelevant to the topic					