

**THE USES AND FUNCTIONS OF L1 IN ELT
SETTINGS: A TASK-BASED STUDY IN TURKISH
CONTEXT¹**

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Abstract

The debate whether the second language or foreign language learners' mother tongue should be included in L2 settings is among the crucial issues of second language acquisition and language teacher training (Atkinson, 1987; Brooks-Lewis, 2009). Moving with this debate, this study focuses on the uses and functions of Turkish in the collaborative talks of seven first year students of English Language Teaching Department while carrying out two different English tasks. This study is guided by a number of dimensions: the uses and functions of Turkish produced by the participants during carrying out each task and the participants' perceptions upon the functions of L1 in ELT classrooms. The data are collected through collaborative dialogues carried out by the participants while doing the two tasks and a structured interview with each participant. The results indicate that Turkish gives the participants the chance of engaging in the content, requirements and management of the tasks and the lexical and grammatical issues included in the tasks. This means that in each task the amount, use and functions of Turkish in the participants' dialogues have changed. Focusing on the assumption that L1 can be regarded as a cognitive and psychological tool (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000), this study ends with suggestions on the uses and function of L1 in ELT settings.

Keywords: *The uses of L1, the functions of L1, language teacher training.*

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1. Introduction

The debate whether the second or foreign language learners' first language (L1) should be included in second language (L2) settings does not seem to reach to any concrete resolution (Scott&De la Fuente, 2008). By the researchers (Gass&Selinker, 1992; Spratt,1985) regarding L1 as a factor resulting in cross-linguistic influence, the inclusion of L1 in L2 settings has not been supported due to the possibility of the use of L1 to cause L1-L2 inference and affecting L2 acquisition negatively (Alegría de la Colina & del Pilar García Mayo, 2009). However, some researchers regard this perspective as taboo. They argue that L1 can be useful as a cognitive aid in the language learning process (Anton& DiCamilla, 1998; Blyth, 1995; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Cook, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

In recent years, especially the researchers who are interested in the social dimension of second language acquisition and teacher training have started to view this issue through the lens of sociocultural theory. Considering the studies focusing on the use of L1 in L2 contexts within sociocultural framework, the findings of some recent studies (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994) demonstrate that a shared L1 can be utilized as a psychological tool to scaffold assistance during L2 learning process (Storch& Wigglesworth, 2003). Wood et al (1976) propose that the L1 scaffolds learners in the process and provide “a social and cognitive space in which learners are able to provide each other and themselves with help throughout the task” (p.338).

In the context that learners share an L1, the use of the L1 may be result in positive impacts if its use is carefully managed (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). However, these impacts generally may depend on when, how, why and in which contexts it is used. At this point, so as to clarify this situation, the studies on the functions and uses of L1 in various L2 settings start to gain popularity. Therefore, before going further in Turkish context, we need to present some details on the functions and uses of L1 in L2 settings.

2. The Uses and Functions of L1 in L2 Settings

The use of L1 can result in positive and negative consequences. Considering its negative impacts overuse of L1 may danger the rationale for using the target language. However, it is a concrete reality for some researchers regarding this issue from sociocultural lens (Anton& Camilla, 1998; Swain &Lapkin, 2000) that “The MT may usually serve social and cognitive functions, including the construction of scaffolded assistance and create through collaborative dialogue the opportunity for language acquisition to take place” (Carless, 2008, p.331). That is to say, L1 can enable L2 learners to achieve their goals and support their L2 learning.

On the way to clarify this belief, the studies on the uses and functions of L1 in different L2 settings have been conducted. According to the study of Brooks and Donato (1994), investigating the dialogue of eight pairs of 3rd-year high school learners of Spanish, three functions of L1 use have been suggested. The first one is ‘metatalk’ including the utilization of learners’ shared L1 to focus on their L2 use. The other two functions are to have a joint understanding of the task and to formulate the learners’ goals. Additionally, the findings of the study carried out by Swain and Lapkin (2000) in immersion classrooms show three main purposes of L1 use: moving the task along, focusing attention and interpersonal interaction. The first of the coding categories, moving the task long, includes managing, understanding, discussing and organizing the semantic information provided in the task. Using L1 for moving the task long also involves

expressing what is understood with the task, making comments on what is happening and what is going to happen in it. The using L1 for focusing attention deals with explaining and engaging in vocabulary and form of the task. In other words, when L1 is used for the purpose of focusing attention, it has the function of providing explanations, emphasis on the grammatical and lexical items. In the scope of the use of L1 for interpersonal interaction, there are some attitudes and activities unrelated to the task. In other words, it includes out of task purposes and attitudes (Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

In sum, these studies indicate that L2 learners tend to utilize their shared L1 in L2 settings. This means that L1 can serve various functions in different L2 settings (Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Although some kind of varieties can be traced in the categorizations on the uses and roles of L1 in L2 classrooms, it is a concrete reality that they have much in common. Additionally, considering the issue in the scope of teacher training, Atkinson (1987) complains about the little attention is given to the use of the first language and draws the researchers attention to the needs of further exploration on the uses and function of L1. That is why, this study has been employed to understand English language student teachers' practices related to L1/L2 use in Turkish context.

3. The Study

3.1. Objectives

This study is descriptive in nature. Although including both qualitative and quantitative data, it adopts qualitative research design. Moreover, it has been conceptualized within a sociocultural framework to investigate first, how much L1 (Turkish) seven ELT students use while performing complex tasks; second, what cognitive functions the L1 episodes serve and last, the perceptions of the participants on the use of Turkish in ELT settings. In detail, three research questions have guided this investigation:

1. How much Turkish-English did the participants utilize during each task? Are there any differences in the participants' practices related to L1-L2 use while doing each task?
2. What functions did the participants' Turkish (L1) episodes serve during the implementation of two tasks?
3. What are the participants' perceptions upon the functions of L1 use in ELT classrooms?

3.2. Participants

For the selection of the participants, purposive sampling was preferred in this study. In the procedures of collaborative dialogues for the implementation of two tasks, seven participants who were the first year students in ELT department took part, whereas to the conduction of the interview five of them attended.

All of the participants were the native speakers of Turkish, and their foreign language was English. Additionally, the six of the participants were females, while the rest one was male. All participants' average age was 20. And they had been learning English for at least ten years.

3.3. Data Collection

Collaborative dialogues carried out by the participants while doing the two tasks and a structured interview with each participant were employed to collect the needed data

during 2013-2014 academic term. This study comprises of two different tasks. The first task which can be regarded as speaking activity is constructed around three pictures. It requires focusing on picture prompts and it does not present any linguistic code to the participants. However, the second one is a writing task which can be seen as a cognitive demanding task owing to its being text and idea generating activity.

As it is mainly a qualitative study, we not only opted for open-ended questions to gather more in-depth answers from our participants, but also paid too much attention for the creation of a natural environment in which the participants could show their performances related to L1/L2 use while doing the tasks collaboratively.

For that purpose the data collection procedure started with meeting with participants in a small room at university to carry out collaborative dialogues. Before implementing the tasks, the seven students were divided into two groups one of which included four and the other one consisted of three participants. Three pictures were presented to each group. Before carrying out the tasks, we presented to them that they were preferred to use English, but Turkish was not forbidden during the collaborative talks to carry out the tasks. So, they were free to use their L1 when they needed it. Each group started to carry out the tasks collaboratively.

In order to get the needed data all of the collaborative talks were recorded. Then, all of the recordings were transcribed, and the uses of Turkish and English during each task have been determined and collected. After then, in each task the parts where the participants have used Turkish were determined and divided into episodes. At last, under the light of the categories of the functions of L1 use expressed by Swain and Lapkin (2000), each Turkish episode was categorized. After the analysis descriptive data on the uses and functions of Turkish during the tasks were gathered. In addition to this procedure, the participants have been also asked to meet with the researcher again to have an interview on the use of L1 in ELT settings.

4. Results

4.1. How much Turkish-English did the participants utilize during each task? Are there any differences in the participants' practices related to L1-L2 use while doing each task?

In this section, each word in the transcripts of the recordings was collected to see whether Turkish was used by the participants during the implementing the tasks. Some descriptive information on Turkish and English words used by each group while carrying out each task is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: *The Frequencies and Percentages of Turkish (L1) and English (L2) Words During the Implementation of Each Task*

	TASK 1						TASK 2					
	L1 Words		L2 Words		TOTAL		L1 Words		L2 Words		TOTAL	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Group 1	110	20	440	80	550	10	952	56	708	44	1700	100
						0						

Group 2	15	5.7	244	94.3	259	10	1687	74.7	570	25.	2257	100
						0				3		

As understood from Table 1, the participants of both groups have utilized English more than Turkish during the first task based on speaking on three pictures. Even when the two groups are compared in terms of Turkish use during the first task, it is clear that the second group with 5.7% have used slightly fewer Turkish words in the first task. Furthermore, considering the use of Turkish in the second task that constructs the long sessions of the recordings, some crucial turns on the use of L1 can be traced. 56 % of the words of the first group during the second task are in Turkish, and 74.7 % of the words produced by the second group have been constructed in Turkish. Despite the variation between the amounts of Turkish produced by each group, both groups have utilized Turkish overwhelmingly during the implementation of second tasks. This means that the participants seem to be more inclined to utilizing Turkish in the second task than they have done during the first one.

4.2. What functions did the participants’ Turkish (L1) episodes serve during the implementation of two tasks?

In order to have better understanding on the use of Turkish during each task, the L1 episodes have been categorized according to the L1 functions proposed by Swain and Lapkin (2000). In Table 2, the frequencies and percentages of the functions that Turkish episodes of each group serve during the implementation of the first task have been presented below:

Table 2: *The Frequencies and Percentages of the Functions Turkish Episodes of Each Group Serve During the Implementation of the First Task*

	Moving the task along		Focusing attention		Interpersonal interaction		TOTAL	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Group 1	6	85.7	1	14.3	---	---	7	100
Group 2	1	50	---	---	1	50	2	100

As understood from Table 2, totally seven Turkish episodes can be traced in the collaborative talks of the first group and two in the second group’s talks while conducting the first task. 85.7% of Turkish episodes produced by the first group have the function of moving the task along, and just one sample in the utterances of the first group has the function of focusing attention. None of the episodes in the talks of the first group have the function of focusing attention. This means that the participants of the first group have mostly used Turkish for the purpose of moving the task along, while the samples serving the function of focusing attention and interpersonal interaction have been hardly traced. Focusing on the Turkish episodes in the talks of the second group, one of them has the function of moving the task along and the other one has been utilized for interpersonal interaction. During this picture prompt task, both groups do not seem to be in need of changing the language they used.

Additionally, when Turkish episodes produced during the second task have been analyzed and categorized the descriptive data presented in Table 3 can be gathered:

Table 3: *The Frequencies and Percentages of the Functions Turkish Episodes of Each Group Serve During the Implementation of the Second Task*

	Moving the task along		Focusing attention		Interpersonal interaction		TOTAL	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
	Group 1	27	46.5	25	43.1	6	10.4	58
Group 2	39	37.2	51	48.5	15	14.3	105	100

In Table 3, in total the frequency of Turkish episodes traced in the collaborative talks of Group 1 is 58, while 105 L1 episodes have been produced by Group 2 during the implementation of the second task. Turkish episodes produced by the first group to move the task along construct 46.5% of the episodes, and then they are followed by the samples of Turkish used for focusing attention with 43.2%. Compared with the other two categories of the functions Turkish, the episodes in the second tasks used for the purpose of interpersonal interaction are less frequent. Focusing on Turkish episodes produced by the second group during the second task, 48.5% of them have been utilized to deal with vocabulary and grammar, and then they are followed by the samples of Turkish to get the task along. In addition to this, the samples of Turkish for serving interpersonal interaction function are fewer than the others.

The data on the functions of Turkish episodes shed light on the fact that generally, the two groups have utilized Turkish to move the task along and pay attention to some lexical and grammatical items more than for interpersonal interaction. The difference in the amount of Turkish between two tasks comes out in the category of focusing attention for the search of vocabulary owing to the fact that the first task does not include any essential vocabulary to lead the students to deal with. For the use of gathering a better understanding on the functions of Turkish during the two L2 tasks, some data gathered through the analysis of the interview have been given below.

4.3. What are the participants' perceptions upon the functions of Turkish (L1) in ELT classrooms?

In this section, five participants' responses on the use of L1 in ELT setting have been gathered by the help of a structured interview. Firstly, we asked our participants to express how often they feel themselves obliged to use Turkish in ELT classes. The participants have reported that they always seem to use Turkish in the class, but mostly it depends on the classroom atmosphere. One student puts it in the following manner:

“Always but generally when in the classroom against teacher I feel excited and I am not relax. So I want to use Turkish.”

In addition to this, the students have stated that they want to use their mother tongue when they feel they cannot express themselves effectively in L2 and when they are not able to understand especially the vocabulary of the tasks. So as to understand the

reasons that lead the students to use their L1 in ELT classes better, some of their expressions on this purpose can be pointed out as:

“In the class when I don’t understand the words.”

“When my vocabulary is not enough, when I do not understand the specific words in the task, I use my native language.”

Furthermore, focusing on the skills they need to use Turkish, most of them have reported that they mostly utilize their L1 in speaking and writing activities. One of the students says that:

“I’m not capable of the vocabulary of the task that is why I use Turkish. I use it generally for writing and speaking activities”

So as to gather some data on the insights of the participants on the roles of Turkish in ELT classrooms, they have clearly supported the use of Turkish in the classrooms especially while a new item is presented and some difficult and unknown issues occur. However, they have agreed upon the fact that this does not mean the use of L2 should be decreased. In other words, they have reported that L1 must be used in situations in which L2 does not work. Two of the students explain it in this manner:

“When it is necessary they must use the native language... A foreign language can only be thought in native language. ”

“It is not the vital point, if it is necessary the teacher can use mother tongue for introduction but using students’ mother tongue can lead the students to create bad habits, so I am not really sure about how to manage it. However, it is good for students but it can create habits.”

For the purpose of getting some ideas on whether the teacher should avoid completely using mother tongue in ELT classrooms, they have pointed that without the use of L1 in some necessary situations, the acquisition of L2 can be impossible. In the following extracts, two students express their ideas by saying that:

“In introduction if we cannot understand the topic when teacher speaks in mother tongue we generally understand better. So it must be used.”

“I think they should speak mother tongue because mother tongue is necessary. We have to use mother tongue because learning a language is very difficult.”

Considering the students’ expressions on the L1 as a whole, it seems that they challenge the exclusion of their L1 by expressing overwhelmingly positive inclination for utilizing L1 in L2 settings. That is to say, generally all of them agree upon the ideas that L1 use is significant and useful in L2 settings.

5. Discussion

No matter what goals of teaching are, it is useful to expose the students to L2 as much as possible. At that point, students’ natural L2 communication in the classroom may result in maximizing the L2 rather than excluding the L1. At this point, Cook (2001) says that “dismissing the L1 out of hand restricts the possibilities for language teaching. Whatever the advantages of demonstrating ‘real’ classroom communication through the L2, there is no logical necessity that communicative tasks should avoid the L1.” (p.403) Whether the L1 has detrimental or beneficial effects may be based on its use and function. In other

words, it depends on “the goals, type of language, materials, method and procedures used in the classroom” (Carson& Kashihara, 2012, p.42).

As shown by the results of the study, there are differences in the amount of Turkish produced by each group of participants during the implementation of each task. In the first task requiring their production, they have not needed to use L1, whereas in the second one, a sample of writing task, they have the potential to use Turkish to implement it. Thus, the findings of the study seem to support Wang and Wen (2002)’s idea “L2 writing process is a bilingual event: L2 writers have two languages at their disposal when they are composing in L2 “(p.239). The difference between the amount of L1 use in two tasks may be based on the types of the activities. Thus, because of the requirements of the writing activities, higher amount of L1 can be traced, which has been supported by the findings of this study. Wang and Wen (2002) point out that:

the amount of L1 use is not related to the difficult level of the composing activity. Rather, the occurrence of L1 seems to depend on the extent to which the composing activity is related to the textual output: the more the cognitive processing is related to the textual output, the less L1 is used in it. The text generating activity is most directly and closely related to the textual output, the less L1 is used in it is the lowest. The idea-generating and idea- organizing activities are less directly related to the text, and the proportions of L1 use in these two activities are much higher (p.239-240).

Under the light of this perspective, it is possible to understand that the uses of Turkish during the second task are more than the ones produced during the first task owing to the fact that the second one is less directly related to textual output when compared with the first one which does not include any linguistic codes affecting the students’ choice of language.

Additionally, the findings of the study reveal that during the first task, Turkish generally occurs to move the task along by focusing on the discussions about the interpretations of the task, and the use of L1 for focusing on form or vocabulary and some out of task comments cannot be observed. However, in order to carry out the second task, the students have discussed on understanding the linguistic and semantic information presented through the introduction of the fairy tale and determining how to continue the tale. After then, they have started to create the content of the tale and to search for the appropriate vocabulary. Owing to this, the uses of L1 to move the task along and focus on vocabulary are the most frequently traced function of Turkish during the second task. Additionally, the analysis of the students’ perception on L1 use shows that the students generally need to use Turkish to make up the task and focus on vocabulary, which facilitates L2 learning. In other words, they feel that L2 learning cannot come out without the use of L1. Therefore, the teachers should include L1 as a tool in ELT classes, but they must pay attention to prevent the negative effects of overuse of Turkish which can cause bad habit formation towards L2 use in the classes. Swain and Lapkin (2000) say:

L1 serves as a tool that helps students as follows: to understand and make sense of the requirement and content of the task; to focus attention on language form, vocabulary use, and overall organization: and to establish the tone and nature of their collaboration. (p.268)

It can be emphasized that by excluding the shared L1 in L2 classes, a teacher also seems to prevent students from using the needed cognitive tool that helps them to carry out a

cognitively and linguistically difficult tasks. The research findings of this study along with some studies in literature (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Storch & Aldosari, 2010) show that Turkish as L1 has played crucial roles in the implementation of the tasks such as reviewing the task, thinking on how to complete the task, searching for vocabulary and grammar. In addition to this, the cognitive demands of the tasks seem to have profound impacts upon the students' utilizing the L1. Therefore, in each task the amount, uses and functions of L1 can change according to its requirements.

Additionally, the findings support the idea that L1 is a natural and cognitive strategy. Therefore, in ELT classrooms, forbidding the use of L1 during the tasks seems to have some futile effects on the students' cognitive abilities and strains required for the completion of the tasks. Though there are not any definite model for the use of L1 which can be thought as "a humanistic and learner centered strategy with potential to support student learning" according to Carless (2008, p.336), it can be said that the use of L1 in L2 settings must be flexible, balanced and supported students' needs at suitable times and ways (Atkinson, 1993; Carless, 2008; Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Nation, 2003; Norman, 2008; Weschler, 1997). This means that language teachers and language teacher educators should be flexible and balanced in terms of the use of a shared L1 in their classes by minimizing its detrimental effects.

6. Conclusion

As a concluding comment we should note that the results of this study should be taken with some caution due to focusing on gathering data on the practices of the participants related to L1/L2 use. Although some further studies are needed in literature to reach in depth understanding of the nature L1 use in L2 settings, the findings of this study shed light on the suggestions which may be given to the teachers and teacher candidates of English language in terms of the L1 use in their classes. The findings indicate that the amount and functions of L1 are likely to change depending on the materials, activities, tasks, needs of the students and your goals, language teacher educators should train pre-service teachers of English in terms of how to use students' shared L1 in their own classes. Carless (2008) emphasizes that:

It would be useful if teacher educator could provide more concrete guidance to teachers as to when student use of the MT may be beneficial. Is it possible, for example, to distinguish between communicative tasks (when TL use is mandatory) and language analysis tasks where the use of MT is accepted or even encouraged? Are there certain types of task when engaging with TL material through the MT is recommended? (p.336).

For humanistic and student-centered classroom environment, instructors and language teachers should become more "skillful, flexible and knowledgeable practitioner and involve a more complex teacher role" (Carless, 2008, p.335). Therefore, preservice teachers of English should be aware of how and when to use L1 in a flexible and balanced manner by minimizing its detrimental effects in their own classes. In fact, the knowledge base of language teacher education may be expanded to foster the development of student teachers as professionals knowing how to deal with a shared L1 effectively in their classes.

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