Re-Examine The Use Of The Student's First Language In The English As A Foreign Language Classrooms: A Cross-Case Analysis From Undergraduate Engineering Students In Bangkok, Thailand

Neelawan Vanichakorn, King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok, Thailand

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how the use of the student's first language (L1) by a non-native English-speaking EFL teacher affects the students' experiences in learning English compared to those in the classrooms where only English is used as a means of teaching. This study also investigates the role of the teacher in providing comprehensible inputs to her EFL learners. A total of four groups participated in this study (approximately 25 students per group). Two groups were randomly assigned to be taught by using both Thai and English languages while the other two groups were taught with English only. Two qualitative data collection methods employed included focus group interviews and classroom observations. A Comprehensible Inputs Checklist was developed to code the classroom observation data and the results were analyzed using a cross case analysis technique. From the cross-case analysis, it was revealed that the students' English competency level and their attitudes toward English played the most important role in the students' learning of English. The teacher's use and non use of the L1 would have a significant effect only when it came to difficult topics or topics that are not related to the students' backgrounds and interests. The results from the checklist showed that the teacher supported and provided 'enough' comprehensible inputs during her teaching. Surprisingly, instead of benefiting more on the students' learning, the use of the L1 was found to help facilitate the teaching of the non-native EFL teacher. Furthermore, classroom atmosphere, as well as students' interactions in the participating classrooms, were analyzed and discussed.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Non native speaking (NNS), Comprehensible inputs

INTRODUCTION

Without question, English is crucial in today's world. English has become the world's second language. In fact, it is safe to say that it is difficult in today's world to be active and successful in international business, politics, scholarship, or science without considerable competence in English. That is why so many people, especially parents, suffer from "English Fever." According to Krashen (2003), "English Fever" refers to "the overwhelming desire to acquire English and ensure that one's children acquire English as a second or foreign language (p.100). However, in a Thai situation, after 12 years of English education, students, parents and industries have repeatedly questioned why university students' communicative English level is lower than expected and, in many cases, non-functional. The Thai public is very vocal in showing its dissatisfaction with the state education system. They also question why private schools can achieve better results than state-run institutions. Another major concern evolves around the 'use' or 'non use' of the students' first language (L1). For the focus of this study, the first language refers to "Thai".

The English Only Approach in Learning Language

The idea that English is the only acceptable medium of communication within the confines of the “English as a Second Language” classroom has been continued to be upheld by many ESL educators, especially in the United States. Historical accounts of language education in the U.S. show that monolingual approaches to the teaching of English have by no means always been the norm (Baron, 1990); rather, there have been cyclical fluctuations in policy often determined by political, rather than pedagogical, factors. According to Baron, the spread of ESL instruction in the first quarter of the 20th century was a direct outcome of the Americanization movement. It was at this time that oral English methods gained favor over methods that allowed the use of the students’ native language, and English-only became the norm in ESL classes.

More recent global roots of commonly held assumptions about English language teaching can be traced to a conference held at Makerere University in Uganda in 1961. Five basic tenets emerged from this conference which, according to Phillipson (1992), became an unofficial and yet unchallenged doctrine underlying much of English language teaching work later on. These tenets are:

- English is the best taught monolingually.
- The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker.
- The earlier English is taught, the better the results.
- The more English is taught, the better the results.
- If other languages are used too much, standards of English will drop (p. 185).

Phillipson argues that these tenets have become the cornerstones of the exclusive use of English worldwide. Thus, although the roots of monolingual approaches to ESL have been largely obscured and, despite the fact that they are based on arguments which have been challenged by research, they have come to be seen as natural and common sense.

The rationale for this view is often framed in pedagogical terms. The more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn. As they hear and use English, they will internalize it and begin to think in English. The only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it. There seems to be an all-or-nothing view: Because the grammar translation method has been widely discredited and “concurrent translation”, in which teachers present the same message in both languages using sentence-by-sentence translation, have not shown to be effective (Legaretta 1979), no alternative, except the complete exclusion of the L1 in the ESL classroom, is seen as valid. Many Thai parents and school administrators seem to be in accordance with these assumptions. They also believed that the ideal teacher of English is a native English speaker.

Native and Non-Native Language Teacher

As discussed in an earlier section that language ability of Thai teachers, as well as their teaching quality, are quite low according to many barriers to professional development, the use of an English-only classroom is considered impossible. Native speakers (NS) are therefore in great demand, especially in Thai private schools and universities. Research on the perceptions of non-native speaking (NNS) English teachers - those held by themselves, by their students, or by native speakers (NS) - is an issue relatively recent in the academic arena (Llurda (ed.), 2005). An abundance of research has been done to examine the teaching behavior of two groups of teachers - native and non-native - who have exhibited differences, not only in terms of their language backgrounds, but also in terms of their qualifications and relevant teaching experience. The main findings of the research on NNS teachers’ self-perceptions reveal the realization of their lower language proficiency and different teaching behavior in comparison with their NS counterparts. Research on students’ perceptions indicates that they tend to be more supportive of NNS teachers the longer they are taught by them (Llurda (ed.), 2005).

In another study, Árvai and Medgyes (2000) examined teaching behaviors of native and non-native English speaking EFL teachers in their classrooms. These researchers found that in actual classrooms, non-native English speaking teachers used various teaching methods to enhance students’ learning. However, some parts of the researchers’ study are not congruent with the present study. In their study, non-native English speaking teachers

explicitly told students what to teach in their classrooms, while native English speaking teachers let students learn naturally.

Interestingly, within the backdrop of the multicultural nature of English, many research findings revealed the advantages of the NNS teacher over the NS teacher. For example, in a recent study conducted in a Thai university context to investigate similarities and differences in teaching behaviors between native and non-native English speaking EFL teachers, it was found that most participating NNS teachers used Thai with their students and also allowed students to speak Thai in English classrooms. This was because students could better understand when they used their first language (Bhakdikul, 2007). Previous studies from the U.S. support these results to some extent. Flores's (2001) study revealed that the use of students' first language helped teachers more easily transfer knowledge to students. In addition, the participants of the present study expressed their views of strengths and weaknesses of being native and non-native English speaking EFL teachers. Most participants believed that NS teachers were role models of English communication. Besides, the participants thought NS teachers were more flexible and adaptable in teaching, while NNS teachers had advantages in translating from English into Thai to make students understand. Moreover, NNS teachers understood students better because they had experienced problems of learning English. However, the participants claimed that NS had difficulties in explaining because they were not able to translate English into Thai, whereas NNS had limited skills and knowledge of English to expand in classrooms.

Although the pedagogical rationale for privileging native speakers is that their knowledge of the target language is better, examination of current theory suggests that being a model English speaker is not a sufficient qualification for teaching ESL/EFL. Phillipson (1992) claims that many of these qualities that are seen to make native speakers intrinsically better qualified as English teachers (e. g., their fluency, appropriate usages and knowledge of cultural connotations of the language) can be acquired or instilled through training. Moreover, he argues that non-native speakers possess certain qualifications that native speakers may not. They have gone through "the laborious process of acquiring English as a second language and have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners (p. 195)". They are also strong role models of bilingual and bicultural achievements.

Evidence Supporting Use of the Native Language

When the native language is used, the practitioners, researchers, and learners consistently report positive results. Rivera (1990) outlines various models for incorporating the L1 into instruction, including initial literacy in the L1 (with or without simultaneous but separate ESL classes) and bilingual instruction (where both languages are utilized within one class). The first benefit of such programs, at the beginning levels, is that they attract previously unserved students—students who had been unable to participate in ESL classes because of limited L1 literacy ad schooling.

A second benefit of using the L1 is that it reduces affective barriers to English acquisition and allows for more rapid progress to or in ESL. Hemminger (1987), likewise, found that a bilingual approach to initial ESL for nonliterate and nonschooled Hmong refugees was more effective than monolingual approaches had been. Although students made almost no progress in two to three years of monolingual survival ESL classes, once a bilingual, problem-posing approach was introduced, progress was rapid. According to Krashen (2004), a strong affective filter (such as high anxiety) will prevent input from reaching those parts of the brain that do language acquisition.

Further, contrary to the claim that use of the L1 will slow the transition to and impede the development of thinking in English, numerous accounts suggest that it may actually facilitate this process. Shamash (1990), for example, describes an approach to teaching ESL used at the Invergarry Learning Center near Vancouver. Students start by writing about their lives in their L1 or a mixture of their L1 and English. This text is then translated into English with the help of bilingual tutors or learners. At a certain point in the learning process, according to Shamash, the learner is willing to experiment and take risks with English. Therefore, starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learner's lived experiences, allowing him to express himself" while, at the same time, providing meaningful written material to work with (p 75)".

These findings concerning use of the L1 are congruent with current theories of second language acquisition. They show that its use reduces anxiety and enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account socio-cultural factors, facilitates incorporation of the learner's life experiences, and allows for learner-centered curriculum development. Most importantly, it allows for language to be used as a meaning-making tool and for language learning to become a means of communicating ideas rather than an end in itself.

As many research studies suggest, the role of the bilingual teacher and the use of the students' native language play an important role in making English more comprehensible. In the following section, the comprehensible inputs hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen will be reviewed and discussed in detail.

Krashen's Comprehensible Inputs

Comprehensible input refers to language used in ways that make it understandable to the learner even though second language proficiency is still limited. Paraphrasing, repetition of key points, reference to concrete materials, and acting out meanings are some of the ways teachers can help convey meaning and thus make language more understandable (Krashen, 1982).

The Input hypothesis is Krashen's attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. In other words, this hypothesis is Krashen's explanation of how second language acquisition takes place. According to this hypothesis, language learning opportunities are richly present during social interactions because participants are likely to be focused on communicating with each other, and they will naturally make use of all their resources to do so—facial expression, dramatization, repetition, and so forth (Wong Fillmore, 1982).

Furthermore, the non English speaker can communicate at a rudimentary level through actions, nods, and facial expressions. As communication is worked out or negotiated, a great deal of understandable language is generated, thereby providing comprehensible input from which language may be acquired. According to Krashen, the learner then improves and progresses along the 'natural order' when he/she receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence.

Krashen (2003) also asserts that we acquire language when we received comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation; that is, when we understand what people say to us and when we understand what we read. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis embodies his view that a number of 'affective variables' play a facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. These variables include motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is 'up', it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

According to Krashen (2003), strong second/foreign language education should not weaken first language education. The first language can contribute background knowledge and literacy development that stimulates second language development. Recent research in bilingual education suggests that the first language can accelerate second language acquisition. To elaborate on this, Krashen explained that this can happen in two ways. First, education in the first language supplies background knowledge, which can help make input in the second language more comprehensible. Second, providing literacy in the first language is a short cut to second language literacy. Students who read and write in their native language transfer this knowledge to written English, thus accelerating their progress in literacy and academic content learning.

In conclusion, language classes should be filled with comprehensible input. Krashen's current research supports the following: base methodology on comprehensible input, don't be concerned about an early start, aim to develop intermediates (not perfect speakers), don't sacrifice developing the first language, and provide the means for continuing to improve after the class ends.

RESEARRCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study was therefore to examine the non-native English speaking teacher' use of the first language (L1) in the classroom (hereafter the L1 in this study means Thai language) compared to monolingual classroom where only the English language is used as a means of teaching. The role of the NNS teacher will also be examined and discussed in terms of to what degree the teacher provides comprehensible inputs to her EFL students. Furthermore, students' interaction, as well as student-teacher interactions, in those bilingual and monolingual classrooms will also be compared and discussed. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out how the use of L1 in English classroom has an effect on students' experiences in learning English as a foreign language. Additionally, the researcher wanted to explore how the use of the students' first language can facilitate the students' learning of English and how it can enhance classroom interaction when compared to those classrooms being taught by English only.

The following questions were used to guide the study:

- Q1** What are the similarities and differences in students' experiences in learning English between the students who were taught with the use of L1 versus those being taught by English only?
- Q2** To what degree did the researcher apply comprehensible inputs in teaching English as a foreign language in the four classrooms being studied?
- Q3** What student interactions and student-teacher interactions are being observed in the classrooms being studied?

OBJECTIVES

This study was conducted to find an answer to a very important question concerning the appropriate teaching approach in EFL teaching. It was an action research done by an actual classroom teacher to examine the role of L1 in EFL teaching. In particular, the researcher wants to investigate whether the use of L1 will facilitate the students' learning of the English language and enhance classroom's interaction, both student-student interaction and teacher-students' interaction. The results of the study will provide useful information on the most appropriate approach for EFL classroom teachers.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focused mainly on students' experiences in learning English between the students who were taught with the use of L1 and those being taught by English only. The researcher, who is non-native English speaking EFL teacher, conducted this study in her own classrooms, implementing the two approaches (using and not using L1). Since the study focused on students' experiences in learning English, other variables in EFL learning, such as other affective factors in language learning and students' prior background knowledge on the content, received less attention. The study also dealt with first-year engineering students at an undergraduate level; other levels were not treated in this study. The sample size was also limited to four English classrooms being taught by the teacher in a college of a specific university setting.

Because this was a qualitative case study, the researcher was the instrument for data collection and analysis. The fact that the researcher is a non-native English speaker implies some limitations. The interview questions and the focus of observations might also reflect the prejudices and beliefs of the researcher. Furthermore, information collected during the classroom observations might be affected due to the fact that the researcher will grade the students at the end of the course. These limitations, however, were known prior to the study and accepted as inherent in the study's design.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the present study were first year undergraduate students at King Mongkut's University of Technology, North Bangkok (KMUTNB) who enrolled in the English II course in the second semester of the academic year 2006. Normally, at KMUTNB, fundamental English courses (English I and English II) are instructed

by teachers from the Language Department, including Thai and foreign teachers. The students from every faculty are required to take these two fundamental English courses. The chance that they will be taught by either Thai or foreign teachers is randomly assigned. All students of the four groups being taught by the researcher that semester were participants of the study. There were a total number of 131 students included in this study. Detail of the participants are shown in Table 1. Two groups (Group A and B) were randomly assigned to be taught by using English language only while the other two groups (Group C and D) were taught by using Thai language together with English language. The students were also informed of their participation in this study and the researcher made clear to them that it would by no means affect their final grade.

Table 1: Details of Participants

Participants	Male	Female	Total
Group A	20	1	21
Group B	25	5	30
Group C	40	5	45
Group D	15	20	35
TOTAL	100	31	131

Of the four groups that participated in this study, two were randomly assigned to be taught by using only the English language in the classroom. The students were not allowed to use Thai when interacting with the teacher nor when they interacted with the students themselves. The other two groups were randomly assigned to be taught by English, together with the use of the Thai language. In the latter group, English was always encouraged to be the first medium of language teaching. However, L1 could be used to provide comprehensible input to the students. The students could also interact with the teachers and their classmates by using English and Thai language. Each group met for a three-hour timeslot each week for a total of 16 weeks before the final examination at the end of the semester.

QUALITATIVE APPROACH

In order to answer the research questions, the qualitative case study was a logical choice as the method of research. This study was designed to explore how the use of L1 affects students' experiences in learning English as well as how it affects the classroom environment, especially when comparing those classrooms where only English could be used. The case study research design, therefore, was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this study. Specifically, a qualitative method of cross-case analysis was employed to see similarities and differences among the four groups of students. A fundamental reason for cross-case analysis is to deepen understanding and explanation. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that when researchers were studying more than one setting at a time, they framed the issue well.

In conducting the research inquiry, the collection of data took place during the whole semester that the researcher was teaching the English II Course (from November 2006-February 2007). Two qualitative data collection methods were employed: 1) focus group interviews with the student participants and 2) classroom observation.

Focus Group Interviews

Krueger (1994) stated that focus group interviews allowed "the researcher to get in the tune with the respondent and discover how that person sees reality" (p. 29). Additionally, he inserted that this method helped the researcher gain data from a "natural environment" (p.19), which was different from a controlled environment in individual interviews. In this study, the researcher was the one responsible for grading the students, which might caused some bias on the students' interview responses. A research assistant then was hired to help collect data, especially to conduct the focus group interviews with the students.

The interviews were conducted two times; at the beginning of the semester and then again at the end of the semester (two weeks before the final examination). For the first interview, 20 volunteers from the four groups included in the study participated in the focus group interviews (approximately 4-5 students from each group). The

questions for the interview were prepared by the researcher and the research assistant. The purpose of the first focus group interview was to examine the students' personal and educational backgrounds, their experiences in learning English as a second language, and attitudes and beliefs about English learning and English teachers. The first interview was conducted by the research assistant during the third week of the semester. The interviews were tape-recorded with permission from the participating students.

The second interview was also conducted by the research assistant and was recorded. This interview intentionally occurred at the end of the semester to gain more input from the students relating to their learning experiences in this course. The participants of the second focus group interview were also voluntary, but some were selected as "key informants" by the researcher and the research assistant. For the purpose of this study, the selected students included those who always participated in the class discussions and activities. Also, the students who demonstrated less active participation were also selected to be included in the second interview. The interview questions focused on the students' opinions of the teachers' use (and not use) of the L1 in the classroom and their satisfaction toward the classroom atmosphere in general. The questions also emphasized to what degree the students felt they received comprehensible input from the teacher. The students also had an opportunity to share their ideas about the ideal language class and also the ideal English teacher.

Overall, two focus group interviews were conducted by the research assistant. The first interview lasted approximately 40 minutes while the second interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. The interviewed tapes were transcribed and later analyzed by the researcher, together with the data from the classroom observations.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observation is a major source of qualitative data for this study. For the purpose of this study, the researcher implemented two teaching approaches by using only English language with groups A and B students, while using Thai and English with the students in groups C and D. During and after each class, the researcher kept field notes from observing the students and the classrooms' atmosphere. The field notes contained information such as classroom activities, the students' responses and participations, the interactions between teacher and students, and the interactions between students themselves, topics and materials used in the classroom, the kinds of activities in which the students were engaged, and use of time. Each field note was dated and timed for easy access during the data analysis process.

The research assistant also observed the classrooms of the four groups. Schedules were developed with the researcher to observe each group for a minimum of ten hours. The research assistant also kept her own field notes from observations. The main purpose of the observations was to gain understanding of the contexts and settings of the classrooms the researcher was teaching. The instances of comprehensible inputs, if any, were the main focus of the research assistant's observation. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) stated that observation is a check that enables the researcher to verify that individuals are doing what they believe they are doing. Therefore, apart from observing the students' responses and interactions, the research assistant observed the researcher's behaviors and interactions with the students during her teaching. Observations of the research assistant also focused on comparing teaching behaviors of the researcher in the four different groups of this study. The role of the research assistant during the observations was that of onlooker/non-participant observer.

In addition, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggested the use of *standardized observational protocols* as a strategy to help organize observational data. In finding 'what' comprehensible inputs that the researcher applies, a Comprehensible Inputs Checklist was developed from Krashen's description of components of teachers' comprehensible inputs (as shown in Table 2). The checklist was used by the research assistant as an instrument to observe some of the ways in which teachers' comprehensible input was presented in classroom environments. Information gathered from the checklist and observation field notes, both of the researcher and the research assistant, was collected and analyzed. In conclusion, the results from observations were an important source to perform the "triangulation" (Patton, 1990, p. 187) with other data sources.

Table 2: Teacher's Comprehensible Input Checklists

Characteristics	Supported	Not Supported	Not Observed	Remarks
1. Focus on meaning, rather than grammar				
2. Provide enough background knowledge				
3. Use slower rate of speech				
4. Provide more frequent and longer pause				
5. Use exaggerated and simplified pronunciation				
6. Use more basic vocabulary				
7. Use lower degree of subordination				
8. Use more declaratives and statements, rather than question				
9. More repetitions				
10. Use every resource available				

Data Analysis

During the final analysis, the researcher conducted a cross-case analysis between the four classrooms (Group A,B,C, and D) to find “thematic connections within and among the participants and their settings” (Siedman, 1991, p. 102). The cross-case analysis allowed the researcher to draw conclusions and find answers to research questions. In doing cross-case analysis for this study, the first step was grouping together data from groups A and B. Then the researcher also grouped together the data from group C and D. Following this process, the data were then analyzed for different perspectives on central issues of the study. The focus issues were how the experiences of English language learning for each student differ when the teacher did or did not use the L1 in the classroom. Also, the data were analyzed in terms of to what degree the comprehensible inputs provided by the teacher affected the students’ participation and interaction in the classroom. Therefore, the synthesis of all the data collected in this study allowed the researcher to draw conclusions and find answers to the research questions.

Finally, the common themes and categories that emerged from interview and observational data were used to perform the triangulation of data sources (Patton, 1990). This means comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means. For this study, the observational data from the researcher and research assistant were compared to increase credibility of the findings. Further, the data from observations were compared to data from students’ interviews to perform the triangulation of the data sources.

FINDINGS

To answer the research questions, the first topic to be focused on during the cross-case analysis was the students’ experiences in learning EFL with the researcher. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out how the factor of using and not using L1 had a similar or different impact on the students’ learning. However, throughout the course of data collection, different themes emerged. Prior to the study, the researcher suspected that the use of L1 would make a significant impact on the students’ learning experiences by receiving enough comprehensible inputs to understand the lessons. The analysis of data, on the contrary, revealed that other factors play more important roles in EFL learning. These factors included students’ English proficiency level and their background and motivation in learning English, teachers’ characteristics and personalities, and topics of the students’ interests.

Students’ Proficiency Level, Background and Motivation

Data from the classroom observation revealed that students who are good at English, or have a positive attitude towards learning English, always performed well in the classroom, no matter what language the teacher used. During the first focus group interview, the respondents were classified into two main groups: 1) the students who like to learn English and have good experiences in learning English, and 2) the students who are not fond of studying English and have quite negative experiences with former English teachers. Common responses from the second group of students included statements such as,

“English is too difficult. I will never be good at it.”

“I don’t like learning English; it’s too difficult and teachers are boring.”

“I want to be able to speak English, but I hate learning grammar!”

One extreme experience came from a student in group A who described his experiences studying English in his elementary school:

“My English teacher is Thai and she always did roll calling and the students had to answer the questions correctly. If the students could not answer correctly, they would get hit by the teacher! From then on, I’m always afraid of speaking English because I’m afraid to be wrong!”

This student accepted that after studying with this teacher, English had never been a pleasant subject for him. Mostly, the students who studied English in their hometown - not in Bangkok, did not have a very positive attitude toward English teachers. The English subjects were mostly taught by NNS teachers who sometimes were the same people who taught them Thai or Social Studies.

As for the first group of students who like to learn English, this group was found to have quite positive experiences with English teachers during elementary and secondary school years. One student responded during the interview that he used to study English with a native speaker from the U.S and that teacher inspired him to want to become proficient in English, especially in speaking. Data from the classroom observation also showed that this student was highly motivated and always participated actively in class activities. The same thing happened with the students who reported to have a positive attitude toward studying English; they always participated in the teachers’ activities, no matter what language the teacher was using.

To elaborate on the results of using the L1 to provide comprehensible inputs to the students in groups C and D, to the researcher’s surprise, the students were found to be lowly motivated and not actively participating in the classroom. Data from the field notes of the research assistant helped confirm this. According to the research assistant’s field notes, the students in groups C and D, who were taught using both Thai and the English language, could be categorized into three main groups: (1) highly motivated students, which accounted for 25 % of the class, (2) 50% of the students were considered ‘average’ students who were not highly motivated, but always followed the teacher’s instructions, and (3) 25% of students who did not participate in the class activities at all. When focusing on the students’ interview responses from the third group, it was found that using L1 in the classroom had always been the norm for their English learning experiences by NNS Thai teachers. Thus, in their view, the use of the L1 by the researcher did not make any difference on their English learning.

On the contrary, observational data from groups A and B, where the ‘English only’ approach was used, revealed that the majority of students were found to be more motivated, especially the students who self-reported of viewing English as one of their favorite subjects. When the teacher enforced the use of English only in the classroom, the students cooperated very well and engaged more in the class activities. It was also found that a group of ‘A’ students were very helpful in facilitating the teacher’s instructions. They were the ones who always responded to the questions and provided assistance to other ‘lower’ level of students during pair or group work. The interaction between so called ‘good’ students with lower level of students will be discussed in detail later on. A couple of students from the English only groups responded to the interview questions regarding the teacher’s exclusive use of English in the classroom that it helped make them try harder and kept them engaged in the ongoing class activities. A specific example came from a student who state:

“When the teacher teaches in English, I have to listen carefully all the times, unless I will get lost and can’t keep up with the lesson. Sometimes, when I really can’t follow what she said, I will ask for help from a friend next to me. But when the teacher teaches in Thai and in English, I don’t have to listen attentively because I understand her Thai anyway. Many of my friends are like this too.”

The times when the students from the English only groups experienced some difficulties occurred with vocabulary learning and grammar teaching. All student participants in this study expressed their favor upon the Thai teacher over the NS teacher when it came to teaching vocabulary and grammar. According to the students,

Thai teachers can easily tell them the meaning of the vocabulary in Thai, while the NS teacher cannot. In terms of grammar teaching, the students said they better understood if the teacher explained the grammar rules and usages in Thai. Providing a lot of examples might be a good way to help teach grammar in the English-only class also, according to a student's suggestions.

Data from observation and interviews revealed one interesting finding about the use of L1 in EFL classes. Instead of the L1 playing an important role in providing the EFL students comprehensible input, in this study, it was found to help facilitate the NNS teacher's instruction. Data from the researchers' field notes showed that the researcher experienced some difficulties when explaining vocabulary to the students in the English only groups who have limited vocabulary. Most of the time, graphics and illustrations in the textbooks were helpful, but sometimes they were not. There was one incident in which the teacher tried to explain the word "victim" under a topic of "Fashion Victim." All the illustrations displayed a wide range of clothes and other luxurious items, resulting in the students' grasping the wrong idea of the word "victim." It was noted in the teacher's field notes that "it will be a lot easier if I could just translate this word into Thai!" This kind of incident happened several other times.

Apart from the students' proficiency level, their attitudes toward and motivation in learning English, teacher's characteristics and personalities also have an influence on the students' learning of English.

Teachers' Characteristics and Personalities

This factor links closely with the above factor on the students' attitudes toward English and English teachers. That is, the students who were taught or trained by so called 'good' English teachers, both NS and NNS, were found to be more motivated in learning English, especially when compared to the students who had negative experiences. During the final focus group interview, the student respondents from all groups agreed that the teachers' characteristics and personalities played very important roles in making the students 'like' or 'dislike' the English subject.

In responding to a question on the current teacher in this study, the students thought that the teacher "had a sense of humor" and successfully used it to create a good atmosphere in the classroom. According to one student from the English only groups, she said:

"She [the teacher] encouraged me to respond in English, and I did so because I believed that she would not punish me or embarrass me in the classroom."

Moreover, the students found the current teacher friendly and approachable. The students from the other groups responded in the same way toward the teacher's characteristics.

Data from the interview also showed that having 'fun' in the classroom is very important to the students. According to the students, the teacher was supposed to take all the responsibility in making the class 'fun.' The students responded further that if they are having fun in the classroom, they will be more motivated to learn, to follow the teacher's instructions, and to participate in class activities. Therefore, it could be concluded that no matter what language the teacher used, if the class was fun, the students were engaged. One student who had experienced learning English with both NS English teachers and Thai teachers pointed out that normally Thai teachers tended to be more strict in terms of classroom disciplines, while the NS English teachers tended to be more relaxed. But, for the current teacher being studied, she was found to be more relaxed than other NNS Thai teachers and the students reported that they had 'fun' in her English class.

Topics of the Students' Interests

Another factor that played an important role in students' learning of English was the topic under study. The textbook for this English Course is *"Straightforward: Pre-intermediate"* by Philip Kerr (Kerr, 2005). During this course, the content covered six main units, with four sub-topics each. Therefore, the students had to cover 24 lessons in total. Data from the researcher and the research assistant's field notes discovered that the topics being studied had significant effects on students' learning and teacher's instruction. To be more specific, if the students could relate to

the topics or the topics were of their interest, they would actively participate in the lesson. However, if the students found that the topics were too difficult or not related to the students' life experiences, their participation, as well as motivation to learn, were found to be lessened. For example, when covering a topic related to job selection and recruitment agency, the teacher had a difficult time engaging the students to the lesson because these students are freshmen and they did not really care about the job selection until they were about to graduate, which would be in the next couple of years. Yet, when the students could easily relate to the topics, such as Animal Lovers, Reality TV, or Doctor Doctor, the teacher could generate responses from the students successfully.

When dealing with difficult concepts or topics that the students felt irrelevant, the teachers' 'use' and 'not use' of the students' L1 made some differences. The teacher had a privilege in explaining and giving more background information on difficult topics to groups C and D students, making them understand easier than those who were provided the information in English. The teacher needed to use every resource available to provide comprehensible inputs to the students. In the next part, the teacher's application of the comprehensible inputs will be discussed.

Classroom Interaction

It was found that in the bilingual classroom where both Thai and English were used in teaching, the students' anxiety levels were kept low because they were allowed to use Thai when asking and responding to the questions. The students also interacted with each other in Thai during pair/group work activities. The students who were in the English only classes were somewhat stressful at first, but when they were getting to know the teacher better and passed through the English only lessons for a couple of weeks, they felt less stressful and became motivated. Data from class observation revealed that the students became engaged in the instructional activities in two incidents: (1) when the teacher gave them some class activities, such as guessing game or role playing and (2) when some students who were considered 'good' or who were well-accepted by their peers responded to or raised some questions to the teacher. In all four classrooms in this study, there would always be one or two 'good' and 'popular' students in each class. It was found that if the teacher needed to elicit responses from the students, she would start with those students first.

There was one instance during the latter half of the semester when three 'good' and 'popular' students (all female) were absent from group B (English only group). The class atmosphere that day was found to be completely different than usual. The students were less active and appeared bored with the lessons. The teacher also had a difficult time engaging the students in the lesson without the presence of the three students. In responding to this incident during the interview, the student from this class explained that the class always needed assistance from these three female students, especially when the teacher taught in English only and the class had to rely on some good students to help them understand the teacher's instruction and direction.

It can be concluded that the students from the English only classes relied a great deal on the so-called good students who helped facilitate the teacher's English only instructions. On the contrary, the students from bilingual classrooms interacted less with each other, but were found to interact more with the teacher because they could communicate with the teacher in Thai. They mostly asked questions regarding the vocabulary and grammar lessons.

DISCUSSIONS & CONCLUSION

Results from cross-case analysis between the four groups being studied provided answers to the following research questions:

Q1: What are the similarities and differences in students' experiences in learning English between the students who were taught with the use of L1 versus those taught by English only?

As discussed earlier in the Findings section, the facts of the teachers' use and non-use of the students' first language would make a significant difference on the students' learning only when the classes were dealing with difficult lessons where the students could not really relate themselves. Explaining irrelevant concepts and higher-

level vocabulary using the students' L1 was found to be the only privilege. Other than that, the students from the English only group were more motivated to learn and the teacher could easily engage them in the instruction by using English only in the classroom. Details of the students' experiences from each group are discussed below.

In groups A and B where only English was used in the classroom, the students preferred the English only approach because it forced them to try harder to keep up with the teacher's instruction. This is in line with what Hopkins (1989) found -- that more advanced students may feel that use of the L1 slows English acquisition, whereas beginning-level students often prefer a bilingual approach. When comparing the four groups under study, the students in group B were found to be the most competent in English. All female students (5) from this group can be considered as "advanced" students who benefited the most from the English only approach. They actively participated in class activities, responded very well to the teacher, and helped their classmates in terms of the teacher's instruction and assignment. They were also considered "role models" and inspired the rest of the class to try their best to be good at English.

Nevertheless, the experiences were completely different from the bilingual groups (C and D). Throughout the course of the study (the data collection period), the students were not very motivated and they did not feel they had an advantage of the teacher's use of the L1 in class. As discussed earlier, the use of L1 in teaching English has always been the norm of English teaching in Thailand. The students, however, felt satisfied with the grammar lessons in Thai. Group C was the largest class with a total of 45 students, and they were the least motivated students. Most of the class time, the students in this group appeared bored with the teacher's instruction and they did not participate in class activities unless the teacher directly instructed them to do so. The teacher had a very difficult time engaging the students in the lessons. Also, there did not appear to be any "advanced students" in this class. As for the students in group D, although the situation was not as bad as those in group C, they were also not found to be very motivated. However, the fact that most of the students in group D were female made the class tend to properly follow the teacher's instruction and participate in class activities.

In conclusion, the students from the English only groups were found to have a better English learning experience when compared to the students who were taught by using L1. Forcing the students to learn with the English only approach was found to become advantageous because the students put more effort into learning than when L1 was used. As for the groups where L1 was used, the teacher might have had a discussion with the students on when it is and isn't helpful to use L1 in the classroom after the teacher had considered the advantages and disadvantages of L1 versus English only and the functions of using each in different context. It is suggested that rules could even be established between the teacher and the students to optimize the students' language learning experiences and to make it a lifelong learning experience for the students.

Q2: To what degree did the researcher apply comprehensible input in teaching English as a foreign language in the four classrooms being studied?

In order to answer this question, the teacher's instructional activities were analyzed using information from the developed Comprehensible Inputs Checklist. The results of the checklist confirmed that the teacher provided almost all characteristics indicated. The following characteristics were found to be supported: focus on meaning, rather than grammar; provide enough background knowledge; use exaggerated and simplified pronunciation; use more basic vocabulary; use more declaratives and statements, rather than questions, and more repetitions. The teacher was also found to try to use every resource available, beside from the textbook itself. Nevertheless, some characteristics, such as using slower speech and providing more frequent and longer pauses, were not supported. Due to too many lessons to cover in each class period, the teacher could not allow as much wait time and longer pauses as should have been.

Data from the research assistant's field notes revealed one interesting finding; i.e. that the teacher was forced to provide more input when teaching to the English only groups, resulting in the students' better understanding of the ongoing lessons. In contrast, the students from the bilingual classrooms were found to receive less comprehensible input from the teacher, in terms of using simplified pronunciation or more basic vocabulary. This was because the teacher could just translate and explain to the students in Thai. In addition, the research assistant pointed out that the teacher always used concurrent translation with the students in groups C and D,

meaning that the teacher stated one thing in English and then restated the same thing in Thai. The students, therefore, would wait for the Thai statements. “Concurrent translation”, in which teachers present the same message in both languages using sentence-by-sentence translation, has not been shown to be effective (Legarreta, 1979). This statement is thus confirmed by the results of this current study. Moreover, according to Krashen (2004), the first language use can hurt when it is used in ways that do not encourage comprehensible input; this happens when teachers translate and students have no need to attend to the second language input. This case happened with the students from the bilingual groups. Teachers, therefore, need to provide comprehensible input to EFL students in a more effective manner, including providing more interactions and discussion between teacher/student. A variety of techniques should also be used to clarify key concepts, such as modeling, visuals, hands-on activities, gestures, and body language.

Another factor worth mentioning was that the teacher’s focus was on meaning, rather than grammar. This was believed to be a good characteristic according to the compressible input theory; however, the students regarded this as disadvantageous. Interview data showed that the students from all groups being studied commented on the teacher’s not focusing on the grammar lesson. The students felt that the teacher should have provided more instructional activities on grammar lessons because they needed it for the examination. Although the students enjoyed practicing, listening and speaking, they also wanted serious grammar lessons. One student responded in the final focus group interview that he preferred to study English with the Thai teacher because the Thai teacher could better explain grammar lessons than a foreign teacher. Thai students have strong concerns about their final grades and marks; that is why they want teachers who can help them receive the highest marks, no matter what nationality the teachers are.

In conclusion, data from classroom observation using the developed comprehensible checklist illustrates that the teacher provided ‘enough’ comprehensible input to the EFL learner during her instructions. However, “concurrent translation” was frequently used by the teacher, which resulted in ineffective L2 learning. A variety of techniques need to be employed to provide more comprehensible inputs to the students. Finally, the students from the English only group were found to benefit more by receiving a lot of input to help the students understand the lessons better.

Q3: What student interactions and student-teacher interactions are being observed in the classrooms being studied?

First, in terms of the student-student interactions among the four groups being studied, there were not any significant differences between the English only group and the bilingual group. The students knew each other very well because this was their second semester together in the program. Peer pressure did not have an effect on the students’ performance in class; instead, the students tended to help each other and collaborate very well in the learning activities. Good students usually helped less competent students, especially as found in group B’s situation. Collaborative efforts were found more prevalent in the English only group because the students tended to struggle a little bit more than the students in the bilingual classes. Further, when facing with any difficulty in understanding the teacher’s instruction, the students tended to seek help from their peers rather than from the teacher. There were just a few times when the students raised their hands and asked a question of the teacher directly.

Additionally, in groups C and D where the L1 was used, the students tended to study more independently. They had less interaction with each other; but on the contrary, they had more interaction with the teacher because they felt more comfortable and more confident expressing themselves using the Thai language. As discussed earlier about the students in group C being the least motivated students, they were also found to have the least interaction with each other and the least interaction with the teacher. Further analysis needs to be done in order to explain the unique characteristic of this group.

As many research studies suggest, student-teacher interaction is found to be an important factor in the students’ learning, especially in language learning. If the students are more comfortable in speaking and responding to the teacher and feel that the teacher is approachable, it helps the students learn more effectively. As discussed earlier in the Findings section, having ‘fun’ in the classroom is a ‘must’ for Thai students. In many instances, the groups where L1 was used, they were having more fun just because the students understood the teacher’s gags in

Thai, while only certain students got the jokes and laughed in the English only classes. Therefore, the use of L1 could enhance classroom atmosphere and engage all students effectively, at least in terms of the teacher's use of gags. In conclusion, allowing the students to use their native language in the English class should be established with clear ground rules in terms of to what degree and under what conditions the students' native language should be allowed. The only use of L1 by the students should be simply to enhance classroom interaction.

In summary, this current study provides useful data on the teaching approach in EFL at undergraduate level regarding the use of L1. For the undergraduate students in this study, the English only approach seemed to be more effective, and more advanced students showed the highest gains from this approach. The use of the students' L1 benefited more when it came to grammar lessons and high-level vocabulary. More case studies like this one could be informative, support professional development and enhance students' learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by the College of Industrial Technology (CIT), King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok. Therefore, the author would like to acknowledge CIT and express gratitude for the financial support in funding this study as well as in presenting the paper at this conference.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Neelawan Vanichakorn is currently an English instructor in the Department of Social and Applied Science at the College of Industrial Technology, King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok, in Bangkok, Thailand. After finishing the bachelor or Arts degree from Chulalongkorn University, she received a scholarship from the Royal Thai Government to pursue her master and doctoral degree in Reading at the University of Northern Colorado, USA from 1997-2003. Her special interest is on Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), focusing on reading skill development.

REFERENCES

1. Árvá, V., & Medgyes, P. (2000) Native and non-native teachers in the classroom. *System*, 28, 355-372.
2. Baron, D. (1990). *The English only question: An official language for Americans?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
3. Bhakdikul, Darika (2007). A Relationship between Beliefs of EFL University Teachers in a Thai University Context and their Instructional Behaviors: A Crucial Issue. Published master's thesis, Mahidol University, Thailand.
4. Flores, B.B. (2001) Bilingual education teachers' beliefs and their relation to self-reported practices. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(3), 251-275.
5. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research* Chicago: Aldine.
6. Hemmendinger, A. (1987). Two models for using problem-posing and cultural sharing in teaching the Hmong English as a second language and first language literacy. Unpublished master's thesis, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Canada.
7. Hopkins, S. (1989). Use of mother tongue in the teaching of English as a second language to adults. *Language Issues*, 2, 18-24.
8. Kerr, Philip. (2005). *Straightforward: Pre-intermediate*. Macmillan Publishers Limited.
9. Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and practices in second language acquisition*. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon.
10. Krashen, S.D. (2003). *Dealing with English fever. Selected paper from the Twelfth International Symposium on English Teaching. English Teachers' Association*. Taipei: Crane Publishing Company, pp. 100-108.
11. Krashen, S.D. (2004). Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions. Retrieved from http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/eta_paper/all.html, October, 2006
12. Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. U.S.A.:Sage Publications.
13. LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2nd ed.). San Diego: Academic Press, Inc.

14. Legarreta, D. (1979). The effects of program models on language acquisition by Spanish speaking children. *TESOL Quarterly*, 13(4), 521-534.
15. Llurda, Enric (Ed.) (2005). *Non-Native Language Teachers. Perceptions, Challenges and Contributions to the Profession*. New York: Springer.
16. Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
17. Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
18. Rivera, K. (1990). Developing native language literacy in language minority adult learners. ERIC Digest (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Center for Applied Linguistics)
19. Shamash, Y. (1990). Learning in translation: Beyond language experience in ESL. *Voices*, 2(2), 71-75.
20. Siedman, I. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
21. Wong Fillmore, L. (1982). Instructional language as linguistic input: Second-language learning in classrooms. In L.C. Wilkinson (Ed.), *Communicating in the Classroom* (pp. 283-296). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

NOTES