

# **Teachers' and students' attitudes toward L1 using in EFL classrooms at Bavi High School, Hanoi = \b**

## **Thái độ của giáo viên và học sinh đối với việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ đầu tiên trong các lớp học tiếng Anh tại trường THPT Ba Vì, Hà Nội. M.A. Thesis**

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#### **1. Rationale for choosing the topic**

English language has been considered as an international language for a long time. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century its importance has been rising significantly and English has become a compulsory school subject in many countries in the world, including Vietnam. This new position of English in schools leads to an increase of interests in the English teaching methodology. One of the current interests deals with the use of first language (L1) in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL).

The use of L1 when teaching and learning English is one of the major issues that have dominated in the area of (FL) acquisition for the last few decades both locally in Vietnam and internationally elsewhere. Since the early 1990s Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has quickly become popular in Vietnam. In accordance with the popularity of CLT in the country, it seems that the only use of English in EFL classrooms is widely supported. However, the use of Vietnamese in the process of teaching and learning English is still common in Vietnam. It has raised many debates among teachers of English, such as whether they should or should not use Vietnamese in their EFL classes, and whether the use of Vietnamese has positive or negative effects on teaching and learning English of teachers and students in Vietnam, it is an assistance or interference, it can be avoidable or not, and if it is unavoidable in what condition and how much of it is acceptable.

Being a teacher of English at BaVi high school, which is located in the mountainous area of Hanoi city, I found that the teachers and the students at my school had

many opinions of using Vietnamese in English class. Therefore, I have been motivated to undertake an investigation to find out their attitudes toward using Vietnamese in EFL classrooms at BaVi high school.

## **2. Aims of the study**

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of teachers and students toward using Vietnamese in EFL classes at BaVi high school. In addition to that, this study also clarified their reasons for using and avoiding Vietnamese and defined the situations in which teachers and students prefer to use Vietnamese in their English classes. More specifically, the study tried to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes of teachers and students toward Vietnamese use in EFL classrooms at Bavi high school?
2. What are their reasons for using and avoiding Vietnamese in EFL classroom?
3. In what situations do the teachers and students prefer to use Vietnamese in their EFL classrooms?

## **3. Scope of the study**

The study focused on investigating the attitudes of the teachers and students toward using Vietnamese in EFL classrooms. The study confined itself to the teachers and students who are teaching and learning English as a foreign language at BaVi high school.

## **4. Methodology of the study**

The study adopted a mix methodology combining both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and data analysis. To improve the validity and reliability of the findings, three data collection instruments were used in the study: questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations.

## **5. Significance of the study**

The findings of the present study are hoped to be useful to the following three groups:

1. Teachers of English can make use of the findings and become aware of the role L1 plays in teaching and learning English as well as the other foreign languages.

2. Students are better aware of their FL acquisition with the use of L1 in order to adjust the frequency of L1 in their foreign language classrooms.
3. Language teaching methodology researchers can conduct further research in the area which may open the way to the development of new English language teaching methods and techniques that work to incorporate L1 use in the EFL classrooms.

More general, the results of this study could be important in raising our awareness of the usefulness, the situations and the frequency our L1 use in FL classrooms and in preparing the ground for a more reasoned use of L1 in the foreign language classrooms.

## **6. Design of the study**

The study has three main parts: Introduction, Development, and Conclusion.

The introduction presents the rationale for choosing the topic, aims, scope, methodology, significance, and design of the study.

The development consists of four chapters. Chapter one provides a review of literature on the history of language teaching methods focusing on L1 use in FL teaching, the arguments about L1 using in the FL classrooms, and the studies focusing on teachers' and learners' attitudes toward L1 use in FL classrooms. Chapter two includes details of the research questions, setting, participants, the data collection instruments and procedure. Chapter three presents the results and analysis of the data collected from the questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. Chapter four reports and discusses the findings of the research for the answers to the research questions proposed at the beginning of the thesis.

The conclusion gives the summary of what has been discussed in the study and suggests further research.

## **PART B. DEVELOPMENT**

### **CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **1.1. History of language teaching methods focusing on L1 use in FL teaching**

A brief history of the literature related to language teaching methods shows that “the role of first language in foreign language teaching is one of the most long-standing controversies in the history of language pedagogy” (Stern, 1992). The following glimpse in the historical sequence of the most-recognized language teaching methods will highlight periodic changes in the role of L1 in FL teaching.

In the early years of the nineteenth century in Western countries, the Grammar Translation Method dominated the FL classrooms. During this period, foreign language was taught through grammar illustration, bilingual vocabulary lists and translation exercises. This method emphasizes on the literary language because its fundamental goal is to help learners be able to read literature written in the target language (TL), rather than provide them with the ability to communicate in that TL. According to this method, L1 is freely used as “reference system” in the process of foreign language acquisition (Stern, 1983). In other words, L1 is used as the main means of instruction.

In the late nineteenth century, the Western world experienced a big change in the need of learning foreign languages with the aim of communicating. This led to the emergence of the Direct Method, which pays its whole attention to the spoken language. The Direct Method is based on the belief that FL learning should be an imitation of L1

learning. In this light, learners should be immersed in the target language through the use of that TL “as a mean of instruction and communication in the language classroom”, and through “the avoidance of the use of L1 and translation as a technique” (Stern, 1983). After its highest popularity during the period from the late nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Direct Method began to decline. However, the method has laid foundation upon which many of the later methods and approaches expanded and developed. Among them are the Audio-lingual Method and Communicative Approach.

The Audio- lingual Method, the origin of which is found in the Army Method developed in response to the need for Americans to learn the languages of their allies and enemies alike during World War II, aims at helping learners “to be able to use the target language communicatively” ( Larsen- Freeman, 1986). Like the Direct Method, the Audio- lingual Method focuses on the spoken language and forbids translation and the students’ mother tongue (MT) in the classroom (Ellis, 2003). Meanwhile, in the Communicative Approach, which has attracted most attention from the language teaching profession during the past five decades, the restricted use of learners’ mother tongue is allowed where feasible and translation may be used when learners find it essential and helpful (Ellis, 2003).

Recently, there has been an increasing attention to the merits of L1 use in the FL classrooms among the language teaching profession. Several studies related to the roles of L1 in the teaching and learning of a foreign language have been carried out around the world in order to develop communicative language teaching which considers L1 as a classroom resource. The Functional- Translation Method by Robert Weschler (2003) can be taken as an example.

## **1.2. Arguments about L1 using in FL classrooms**

### **1.2.1. Arguments against L1 using in FL classrooms**

There are some strong supports for the monolingual approach to teaching a foreign language as well as varied arguments against using the students’ mother tongue in the FL classrooms. Cook (2001) summarized these arguments in the three following fundamental principles:

1. The learning of a foreign language should follow the model of the learning of an L1 (through maximum exposure to the FL).

2. Successful learning involves the separation and distinction of L1 and the foreign language.
3. Students should be shown the importance of the FL through its continual use.

### **1.2.2. The arguments in supports of using L1 in FL classrooms**

The arguments in supports of using the learners' mother tongue in FL instruction clearly reveal that the use of first language does not have a negative impact on FL learning, and it can be factor to help students improve the way they learn a foreign language. Although the 'English Only' paradigm continues to be dominant in communicative language teaching, research into teacher practice reveals that the L1 is used as a learning resource in many EEL classes (Auerbach, 1993). This author also adds that when the first language is used in EFL classes, practitioners, researchers, and learners consistently report positive results. The arguments in supports of using L1 in FL classrooms can be developed based on three main values: pedagogical values, psychological values, and socio- cultural values

#### ***1.2.2.1. Pedagogical values***

#### ***1.2.2.2. Psychological values***

#### ***1.2.2.3. Socio- cultural values***

### **I.3. Studies focusing on teachers and learners' attitudes toward L1 use in FL classrooms**

A number of studies have considered the attitudes and perceptions toward the L1 use in the FL classrooms. They can be classified into two categories: Those which only investigate the attitudes of language learners, and those which explore the attitudes of both language learners and teachers.

In the first study, Prodromou (2002) divided the number of his 300 Greek participants into three groups: elementary, intermediate, and finally advanced level students. He tried to investigate the reaction and attitude of students with different levels of proficiency. The findings showed that students at higher levels of study have a negative attitude toward the use of L1 in their classroom, but lower students showed more tendencies to accept the use of their mother tongue.

Schweers (1999) conducted a study with EFL students and their teachers at his Puerto Rican university and found that 88.7 percent of the students and 100 percent of the

teachers felt that Spanish should be used in their English classes. Eighty- six percent of the students felt that their L1 should be used to explain difficult concepts and 67 percent said that their L1 helps them to feel ‘less lost’. Schweers concluded that the “pedagogical and affective benefits of L1 use justify its limited and judicious use”.

Tang (2002) conducted a similar study in China with Chinese speakers. In comparing the results of her study to those of Schweers, she says, “both studies indicate that the mother tongue was used by the majority of teachers investigated and both students and teachers responded positively toward its use” (2002). The research shows that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in English classroom does not reduce students’ exposure to English but rather can assist in the teaching and learning process.

To sum up, the use of L1 in a foreign language classroom has been the subject of much debate and controversy. Some see its use as a negative and harmful to FL learning and teaching process while others view it as a valuable tool or resource. Opponents of L1 use argue that adults can learn a foreign language in the same way as children pick up their mother tongue, and so there is no need of L1 use in FL classrooms. The fear that using L1 will interfere with FL and its use also reduces students’ exposure to the target language are also further arguments put forward against the use of L1 in FL classroom. Proponents of L1 use, on the other hand, argue that the occasional use of L1 has a supportive and facilitating role in learning and teaching of a foreign language. These supporters believe that L1 have three main values: the pedagogical, the psychological, and the socio- cultural values. Recent empirical studies (Prodromou 2002, Schweers 1999, and Tang 2002) also tend to reinforce what has been argued by the supporters of L1. Their finding shows that L1 has a place in FL learning and teaching.

## **CHAPTER 2. THE STUDY**

### **2.1. Research questions**

The study tried to seek answers to the following basic questions:

1. What are the attitudes of teachers and students toward Vietnamese use in EFL classrooms at BaVi high school?
2. What are their reasons for using and avoiding Vietnamese in EFL classroom?

3. In what situations do teachers and students prefer to use Vietnamese in EFL classrooms?

## **2.2. Methodology**

### **2.2.1. Setting and participants**

The participants of the study included 13 teachers of English (2 males, 11 females), who have been teaching English at BaVi high school for 3-15 years, and 100 students who have been learning English as a foreign language for 8-10 years. All the participants are the Vietnamese, so their first language is Vietnamese.

### **2.2.2. Data collection instruments and procedure**

In this research, data were collected from three instruments: questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations.

## **CHAPTER 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **3.1. Analysis of teachers' questionnaire results**

### **3.2. Analysis of students' questionnaire results**

### **3.3. Summary of the teachers' interview**

### **3.4. Summary of the students' interview data**

### **3.4. Analysis of classroom observation checklist and written notes**

#### **3.4.1. Analysis of observation checklist and written notes about the teacher's use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms**

#### **3.4.2. Analysis of written notes about the students' use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms**

## **CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**



This chapter presents the research findings collected through three data collection instruments: questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. The findings of the research were reported and discussed for the answers to the research questions proposed at the beginning of the thesis.

***Research question 1: What are the teachers' and students' attitudes toward using Vietnamese in English class?***

The results of the study indicated that 83.3 % of the teachers and 91 % of the students participating in the investigation at BaVi high school showed their positive attitudes toward using Vietnamese in their English classes. Most of the teachers and students highlighted the positive effects of Vietnamese on facilitating students' comprehension of English and building a comfortable and motivating environment for English classes.

***Research question 2: What are teachers' and students' reasons for using and avoiding Vietnamese in their EFL classrooms?***

The result of the study revealed that the main reason for teachers' use of Vietnamese in their English class. It is because they are afraid their students do not understand the lesson. Most of the teachers suggested that it is better to use Vietnamese to clarify difficult items for their students, especially for weak students so that they do not lag behind their peers and can understand the lesson more easily.

***Research question 3: In what situation do teachers and students prefer to use Vietnamese in their English classes?***

The findings of the study highlighted some situations in which Vietnamese appeared to be a helpful option. Data from the research instruments revealed that using Vietnamese for explaining complex grammar structures, giving the meanings of new words, and clarifying the difficult abstract ideas were the most common uses among the teachers. It can be seen from the classroom observations that the teachers' use of Vietnamese in these situations not only made the teachers feel more confident but also help students understand the lesson better.

### **PART C. CONCLUSION**

The study indicated that majority of participants in the investigation responded positively toward the use of Vietnamese in English classes at BaVi high school. Teachers and students support using Vietnamese because they found its roles in facilitating English students' comprehension and building a comfortable and motivating environment. Most of the participants prefer to adjust the amount of Vietnamese and English when they realized the importance of exposure in English and the danger of Vietnamese over-use in English class. The study also highlighted three dominant situations for the use of Vietnamese in English classes: explaining complex grammar structures, giving the meaning of new words, and clarifying difficult, abstract ideas.

The findings of the study helped teachers and students at BaVi high school recognize the roles Vietnamese in teaching and learning English. Teachers and students can adjust the frequency and the situations in which they should use Vietnamese to improve their English teaching and learning quality.

Possible implications drawn from this study that teachers and students should agree on the purpose of Vietnamese use and explore the most effective ways to employ it by discussing them together. This should, in turn, motivate students, facilitate their learning, and lead to successful English acquisition.

While the study provides some implications for teachers and students at BaVi high school, it is not free from limitations. First of all, limitations were found in the

number of participants: only 3 teachers and 5 students were interviewed, five classrooms were observed. Secondly, the study was done in limited time duration, so it cannot fully reflect the teachers and students' attitudes toward using Vietnamese, which may only be revealed after an extensive period of observation.

It is hoped that the findings of the research will explore the new ways about the use of L1 in EFL classroom in general, and use of Vietnamese in an English classroom in particular. As a result, there is a need to conduct experimental studies in order to evaluate the actual role of Vietnamese in EFL classroom, thus making important contribution to the development of a systematic way of using Vietnamese for effective English language teaching and learning.