

The Use of Vietnamese in English Language Classes - Benefits and Drawbacks

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Abstract: *Vietnamese EFL teachers usually consider whether Vietnamese should be used in English teaching due to existence of controversial theories on the use of L1 in teaching L2. In particular, some linguists allow the use of L1 in teaching L2, whereas others place an emphasis on the significance of L1 in L2 classes. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the use of Vietnamese in TEFL? Should the teacher use and allow the use of L1 in English language classes?*

1. COMMON REASONS FOR USING VIETNAMESE IN COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH CLASSES

One reason for the use of Vietnamese in teaching English is the teacher feels he or she needs to make all of the students understand his or her instructions, which is relatively applied to large classes of mixed levels. In these classes, students at lower levels usually cannot make sense of the teacher's and their peers' English lecture and/or communication. Thus, bilingualism is widely regarded as the easiest measure for students to get the teacher's guidance.

Another reason is the required coursework is unrealistic; that is, the teacher cannot cover all the lessons required within a limited time. Translation, therefore, may do a great deal of help because translation from English into Vietnamese generally consumes less time than English explanation which, if repeated several times, may leave the lesson unfinished.

Last but not least, teaching without sufficient preparation, the teacher must exploit Vietnamese in his or her explanations as teaching aids, such as photos and video clips, are not available as illustrations which are assumed to reduce the use of Vietnamese in classroom.

2. ADVANTAGES OF AVOIDING THE USE OF VIETNAMESE IN EFL CLASSES

A tremendous amount of research has recorded the importance of both the learners' L1 and L2 in language learning (Atkinson, 1987; Levine, 2003 & Turnbull, 2001), which matches the perspective by earlier linguists and scientific theorists such as Henry Sweet (1964) and Harold Palmer (1956) that L1 plays a vital role in acquiring a second or foreign language.

Auerbach (1993) has conducted a research study on adult English as a second language (ESL) and concluded that they express their ideas more confidently when allowed to speak L1 than in a setting where they can only speak English. Also, the use of Vietnamese in English classes can function cognitively, psychologically and linguistically.

Vietnamese also has semantic functions in English learning. English language learners routinely make use of various semantically-rooted techniques, such as looking up in the dictionary, in their quest for meaning in English.

Finally, the use of Vietnamese allows valuable interactions to take place, creating a social space in which students may collaborate to gain control of a task, and further, complete a task that may otherwise be cognitively out of reach. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) also report that in their study of ESL students performing a text reconstruction task and a joint composition task, the observed pairs primarily used the L1 in conversations about vocabulary and meaning, and grammar. The results of the study show that the L1 is often used as a mediating tool to facilitate task completion.

3. DISADVANTAGES OF THE USE OF VIETNAMESE IN EFL CLASSES

Despite the advantages of using the L1 as a resource, instructors are nonetheless influenced by other L2 research which insists that the L1 must be avoided by all means due to its disadvantages (Auerbach, 1993).

The interference of Vietnamese may make learners use English structure incorrectly. For example, a large number of Vietnamese EFL learners say “*The room is wide 4 meters.*” instead of “*The room is 4 meters wide.*” due to the difference in word order between Vietnamese and English.

Secondly, it can be hard for students to speak accurate English sounds due to a lack of access to an English speaking environment. Although there are instructions from the EFL teacher and books that a vowel is shortened when followed by a voiceless consonant, how much shorter is it? Only when learners hear the exact sounds, do they get and pick them up through listening and communication (Cook, 2000 & Carless, 2008). Students learning in an L2-rich language context gain a greater sense of the unpredictable nature of the L2, experience real language, and develop their own language system.

Thirdly, learning a foreign language is based primarily on practice (Macaro, 2001). Without opportunities to reuse what learners have obtained, how can they foster their skills? In countries where people do not use English in everyday conversations, like Vietnam, classes, by and large, are the only place for students to develop their English skills through access to and practice of English so that they can improve their competencies.

The use of Vietnamese in teaching English vocabulary may also cause misunderstandings among students due to the existence of polysemous words or students’ misuse of the Vietnamese equivalent. For instance, the term *generous* as in the sentence *He is very generous.* may be translated incorrectly.

Original text

Mistranslated version

He is very generous.

Anh ấy là người rộng lượng.

The students may misunderstand the sentence that *He is very tolerant or he easily forgives other people’s mistakes and/or errors.* due to the translation of *generous* into *rộng lượng* in Vietnamese. The sentence, in fact, means *He is not mean or willing to give or share.*

Finally, students from different areas in Vietnam may not understand or misunderstand the teacher’s Vietnamese speaking due to their different dialects. The term *a bed net* refers to *a thing that offers protection against mosquitoes and other insects during people’s sleep.* The term *bed net* can be translated by the teacher as *cái màn* in Vietnamese used by the northerners, but southern students use the term *cái màn* in Vietnamese to refer to *curtain* in English. The difference in Vietnamese dialects between the northerners and southerners is a big concern in the use of Vietnamese to explain English vocabulary.

4. IF VIETNAMESE SHOULD BE USED IN EFL CLASSES

There should be restrictions on the use of Vietnamese in EFL classes. In other words, the native language should be used in a foreign language class only when there are no alternatives.

Vietnamese can be a choice when there is an indication that some learners lag behind in absorbing the target input. However, it should only be a tool to overcome language barriers and English stills remains the dominant language in the classroom.

It is also possible to use Vietnamese to avoid the speakers’ interruption in pair and group work. Communicative Language Teaching allows the use of L1 in L2 class in order that students can speak confidently and fluently in discussions (Gibson and Chandler, 1988).

It is a good idea that the teacher need to be well-prepared for the class performance; vocabulary, for instance, can be explained with visual aids, such as photos, real objects, and video clips, so that it can make sense to students without Vietnamese instructions. In case, explanations of abstract things or complex ideas should be made, the teacher had better try speaking and rephrase it in English prior to any clarification in Vietnamese.

Finally, whenever the use of Vietnamese is found necessary, it is recommended the teacher explain, not translate, the intended input to avoid possible misunderstandings caused by polysemous words and different dialects in Vietnamese among students.

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