Chapter 13

The Multilingual Condition and EFL Paradigms in Moroccan Higher Education:
Investigating L1 Perceptions and Practices Among Professors and Students in a Classroom Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the beliefs and perceptions of Moroccan EFL university students and professors towards the use of L1 in the multilingual English classroom. It also delves into how such L1 use is enacted into the classroom depicting when and for what purposes. This study was of a mixed method using both qualitative and quantitative approach. For this purpose, two different instruments were employed to collect the relevant data: an interview and a questionnaire. Subjects of the study consist of 476 randomly selected EFL university students and a sample of 20 EFL university professors. Results show that though the attitudes of the teachers and the students about using L1 were different, still, all participants assumed having used L1 for specific reasons.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of L1 use in target language classrooms has been the object of debate among practitioners of second and foreign language teaching. As second/foreign language learners are actually speakers of at least one more language, student use of L1 remains a core feature of second/foreign language (L2) or target language (TL) classrooms, making the L1 almost impossible to eliminate. Despite increasing literature supporting the L1 as playing instrumental cognitive and affective roles that enhance L2 or TL

learning, the English-only approach has been preferred and prescribed by both official and non-official policies in English Language Teaching (Adinolfi, & Astruc, 2017).

As a result of globalization, the rise of English as a global language has led to the rise of English language education in Morocco. This means that the English language is gaining more popularity in a country which is known by its multilingual status, since it has generally two first languages which are Amazigh and Moroccan Arabic, in addition to a common L2 which is Modern Standard Arabic which is taught at school and which is also the first official language in the country (Bensoukas, 2010). All Moroccans learn French as an L3; a language which is commonly used in administrations, mass media and communication. Starting from middle school, three foreign languages are introduced; therefore, learners have to choose between studying English, Spanish or German. Still, English remains the most commonly chosen language as a foreign language for the majority of students, and it is even becoming more popular than French among youngsters. English is taught as a foreign language in both mainstream and English language classes in university contexts to students who do not necessarily share the same first languages (L1s). This multilingual situation may transcend the conventional debate of whether using the L1 as a language of instruction of the foreign or target language to the question of using which L1 exactly in the learning process (Bensoukas, 2010; Belhiah, & Lamallam, 2020).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Which Language to Use in the Classroom?

The TL- Only Approach

The subject of using a first language (L1) vs. a second/foreign (L2) or target language (TL) in foreign and second language classes is one of the most heated controversies. Proponents of TL-only approaches say that this offers learners with a TL-rich environment in which learning chances are maximized through enhanced teacher-student and student-student interactions. (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013: 1; Tang, 2002: 36). The monolingual English-only approach has become so ubiquitous that many second language teachers continue to maintain that the L2 is the "only acceptable medium of communication" in the classroom. (McMillan & Rivers, 2011: 251). This implies that the language learners' first language is of no value in classroom.

There are two reasons for the widespread use of a TL-only approach. The first reason is that many people believe that using a first language hinders or interferes with acquiring a second language. (Cole, 1998). The other is more of a practical necessity in situations where the teacher may not share their students' L1 in linguistically heterogeneous classes, or where the Western English language teacher is monolingual. (Cook, 2001: 405). In such circumstances, classroom instructions are typically given in English alone, and students are frequently asked to keep the classroom environment English-only. However, in an otherwise multilingual classroom, "the issue of... the mother tongue hardly arises" (Atkinson, 1987: 3) because English is the lingua franca; therefore, by using such a common language, no student would be at a linguistic disadvantage. Furthermore, it is thought that using L1 interferes with the TL's learning process. (Macaro, 2005: 65). This is because errors in the TL are considered to be the result of the 'transfer' of "tenacious and deeply rooted … [L1] habits" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004: 19).

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