



Using L1 in Teaching Vocabulary to Low English Proficiency Level Students: A Case Study at the National University of Laos

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Abstract

Many English professionals do not seem to pay much attention to the use of L1 in English language classrooms, based on the tenets that English should be taught in English to expose the learners to English which would enhance their knowledge of English and accelerate their learning. While research findings have been inconsistent in relation to this position, the results of the present study found evidence to the contrary. Using 169 students of a low proficiency level, it was found that using learners' mother tongue (L1) to teach English as a foreign language in Laos enhanced their retention of new vocabulary items both in isolation and in context. This is possibly due to clear definitions and explanations in L1, dictation quiz and translation exercises in the classroom. This would have implications for English professionals.

Keywords: Mother tongue (L1), Teaching vocabulary, Low proficiency level, Dictation, Translation

1. Introduction

Many English language teaching professionals dispute the L1 use in the classroom, something that should never happen in today's modern, communicative lessons. They wonder how students can truly appreciate target language exchanges if they are continually relying on their L1s (Mattioli, 2004). Ellis notes that too much L1 use could "deprive the learners of valuable input in the L2" (1984, p. 133). Auerbach (1993) observes that in ESL classroom a numbers of teachers, holding the belief that L1 use will impede progress in the acquisition of English, devising games, signals, and penalty systems to prevent the students from using their L1. This is evidenced by the article of Weinberg (1990), extolling the virtues of fining students for using their L1. "This is an English-only classroom. If you speak Spanish or Cantonese or Mandarin or Vietnamese or Russian or Farsi, you pay me 25 cents. I can be rich." (p. 5). Several authors suggest that L1 does not play an essential role in foreign language teaching (Tang, 2002). Whilst Nation (1990), for example, suggests that the degradation of mother tongue has a harmful psychological effect on learners. Atkinson (1987) not only acknowledges the positive role of the mother tongue in the classroom, but also identifies the following uses of it: eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instructions, enhancing co-operation among learners, promoting discussions of classroom methodology, improving presentation and reinforcement of language, checking for sense, testing, and development of useful learning strategies. The following are several reasons why the L1 should be used as a tool in the language classroom:

- it is more natural to use the L1 with others who have the same L1
- it is easier and more communicatively effective to use the L1
- using L2 can be a source of embarrassment particularly for shy learners and those who feel they are not very proficient in the L2
- L1 can help to move the task along by establishing a joint understanding of the text and to manage the task
- L1 allows learners to focus attention on vocabulary and grammatical items (e.g., searching for vocabulary items or providing information and explanation about grammatical rules and conventions
- L1 may facilitate classroom activities, particularly for low proficiency students and complex tasks
- L1 can provide a foundation for learners on which to build L2 structures, especially during collective activities in the classroom, and

- L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' live experiences, allowing them to express themselves (Nation, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Atkinson, 1987; Wells, 1999; and Schweers, 1999).

Many professionals in the field of second language and foreign language acquisition agree that L1 should be used with students who are not highly proficient in the target language (Nation, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Atkinson, 1987; Tang, 2002; Auerbach, 1993; Mattioli, 2004). This may suggest that L1 plays an important role in language teaching, especially for the low proficiency learners (LPL).

However, there are not many empirical studies that have examined whether or not L1 is an effective tool for teaching LPL. A recent study by Ramachandran and Rahim (2004) investigated the effectiveness of using the translation method in recalling the meaning and retention of the words with elementary level ESL. Their results indicated that the translation method through using L1 was more effective than the non-translation method in enhancing ESL learners' vocabulary learning ability, and it could improve elementary ESL learner's ability to recall the meaning of the word learnt.

Based on the above, it seems necessary to look at the approaches for vocabulary teaching. Sökmen (1997) states that vocabulary teaching was based on a top-down, naturalistic, and communicative approach which emphasized implicit and incidental learning of vocabulary. Inferring from the context and guessing are considered to be implicit teaching. The implicit approach is commonly used in foreign language teaching classrooms. Teachers often encourage students to guess the meaning of the word by looking at the context where the words are located. They rarely use L1 in the classroom because they are concerned that students may just rely on their L1. Whilst, more studies show that implicit teaching may not be appropriate for LPL, it could cause more difficulties in the process of learning.

Several studies of vocabulary acquisition show that the combination of implicit and explicit vocabulary instruction is an effective way for acquiring vocabulary (Sökmen, 1997). Ramachandran and Rahim's (2004) study shows that explicit instruction which uses L1 could encourage ESL students whose English proficiency is at the elementary level to recall and retain the words more effectively.

Whilst L1 is overlooked in our institution (Department of English, Faculty of Letters, National University of Laos), where English is taught as a foreign language, it seems that many teachers believe that English should be taught in English because it is the only way to expose students to the target language in the classroom. The results of recent studies in our institution show that students from the first to the final year had a fairly low achievement level. Keomany (2006) reported that first year students could not make any progress outside the scheduled academic year. He concluded that they had such a low achievement because the teachers taught English in English. They gave the meaning of the words and the explanation in English as suggested by Weinberg (1990). Even students in the final year had difficulty with basic vocabulary items in the level of 1-1.000 in the *General Service List of English Words* (GSL) by West (1953). Such students had similar achievement as the first year students (Soulignavong, 2007).

The reason we are focusing on vocabulary acquisition is that the acquisition of vocabulary has a central role in learning a second language (Sökmen, 1997). Another claim is that second language learners need to have a substantial vocabulary size (Nation, 2001). Cook (1991) argues that vocabulary learning is essential for the four language skills. The study of Ringbom in 1987 clearly indicates that L1 clearly has a very important role to play in the deliberative learning vocabulary (Nation, 2001). Auerbach (1993) claims that the use of the learner's L1 in the L2 classroom will have a positive effect on learners' second language learning, especially in the area of vocabulary.

This study, inspired by their research, aims to address the problem of low achievement in our institution, which investigated the effectiveness of using L1 in teaching vocabulary (using Lao Language for giving meaning, explanation, and translation exercises from Lao to English vice versa, dictation quiz).

2. Research design

This study aimed at answering the following question:

1. Does the L1 help increase students' achievement in vocabulary?

2.1 Participants

Four classes (n = 169) of first year English majors attending a university in Laos participated in this study. Two classes (n = 86) were assigned as an experimental group and the other two classes (n = 83) were assigned as a control group. The experimental group received L1 in vocabulary instruction while the control group did not receive any treatment. The mean scores of the experimental group and the control group in the pretest were 9.9 and 10.8, respectively. The results of t-test analysis showed no significant differences between the two groups.

2.2 Instrumentation

Three types of instruction were employed in this study, namely, testing materials (pretest & posttest), teaching instrumentations and teaching techniques.

2.2.1 Testing materials: Pretest & Posttest

Both the pretest and posttest had the same format: multiple choice tests with four alternative answers. The test consisted of two parts: (1) vocabulary in direct translation from English to Lao (to check student recall and retention of the words) (10 items), and (2) vocabulary in context (5 items). In the pretest, all 15 words were taken from GSL (West, 1953), which is in the level of 1-1.000. In the posttest, the words were taken from the teaching materials in the Language Practice (LP) classes, which both groups had learnt in the academic year 2006-2007. All words are in the level of 1-1.000 of GSL. The Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of both tests. It was proved that both tests were reliable in the level of .86 and .80, respectively.

2.2.2 Teaching Materials

The new words are in 12 units of the General English (GE) (Souvannasy et al., 2006), which was used with the experimental group. The words appeared in the context, and on a word list with Lao translation and parts of speech at the end of each unit. The New Headway Elementary (NHE) (Soars & Soars, 2000) was used with the control group, which has the word list at the end of the unit with the part of speech, but there is no definition given.

2.2.3 Teaching Techniques

The new words were introduced in an easy context with L1 definitions and explanations, and a quiz/small test was used to check student understanding and whether they could remember the words or not. The oral translation or dictation quiz took place at the beginning of every class. This was used to check whether the students could remember the words, which they have learnt in the previous lesson. The tests are the translation sentences or words from Lao to English or English to Lao, which were normally at the end of each unit. However, with the control group, the teachers normally gave the definitions and explanation in English. There had no dictation and translation exercises for each unit. Most practice of using the words were based on their textbook (NHE).

3. Results and Discussion

Students in the experimental group which applied L1 in teaching new words outperformed those in the control group in both vocabulary in direct translation and vocabulary in context. Student achievement for each part of the test was investigated by comparing the mean scores of the two groups by using MANOVA. There was a significant difference in the achievement at the level of $p < .001$.

3.1. Direct translation

The students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group. The difference in the mean scores of the groups was significantly different at the level of $p < .001$ as shown in Table 1. The posttest achievement by item showed that the rates of right answers in the ten items were higher in the experimental group. Seven items out of 10 items were over 90% in the experimental group. On the other hand, the rates of right answer for all items in this part were less than 90% in the control group. Figure 1 shows the percentage of right answer by item in the direct translation part. Table 2 shows the frequency of the appearance of the words in the direct translation parts in both NHE and GE.

There are two possible explanations for the achievement of the experimental group. First, all words were assigned definitions and explanations in L1 (Lao). This might help students to understand the meaning of the words clearly. On the other hand, in the control classes, teachers were expected to explain the words in English and not to give equivalent words in L1. So, in the control class, even though the teachers could recognize new words and explained them, it was difficult for students to understand the meaning of the words. Second, in the experimental group, students were required to memorize new words in every class, and there was a vocabulary quiz/test in every class. In each class before starting a lesson, the teacher reviewed the words, which the students had learned in the scheduled period through either oral translation or dictation. This kind of test is a very good tool to motivate students. Repeated vocabulary tests pushed students to memorize words. In general, the above two reasons were deemed to be the most essential, and they have implications for vocabulary acquisition.

3.1.1 Clear definition and explanation in L1 (Lao)

Some people believe that with frequent exposure, students can acquire vocabulary naturally. Kachroo (1962; cited in Nation, 1990) found that words that occurred seven or more times in the course book were known by most of his Indian learners; and Salling (1959) (ibid) found that at least five times of repetitions were needed to ensure learning. Crothers and Suppes (1967) (ibid) also found that six or seven times occurrences to be necessary for learning. Later Saragi et al. (1978) found that 16 or more repetitions were necessary (ibid).

An example from "Q8 *country*" did not support this. Frequent exposure sometimes resulted in natural acquisition, but sometimes in widespread misunderstandings of the word.

The rate of right answers for the experimental group was 85.9%, while for the control group it was 77.0% as shown in Table 3. The word in Table 2 appeared 77 times in NHE. However, 23.0% was distributed in option "(a) *city*", "(b)

world”, “(c) *capital*” and “No answer” (11.5%, 3.3%, 4.9% and 3.3%, respectively). This indicates that the frequency of the appearance could not always help students to acquire the word. Why about 11% of the students in both groups chose “(a) *city*” as the right answer can be explained as follows: in the GE, “*country*” appeared for the first time in an exercise for translation of “*My country is small.*” Teachers tended to be less careful in explaining words in exercises than words in the leading text. If the students made a mistake at the first appearance, it would be difficult to correct their misunderstanding. However, the reason why about 11% of students taught with NHE confused “*country*” with “*city*” was difficult to explain. In NHE the word “*country*” was introduced for the first time in a gap filling test on page 12 (Unit 2); later it was introduced in an easy context on page 50 (Unit 6) (“*Operator: International Directory Enquiries. Which country, please? ‘You: Australia’*”); it appeared again in a more complex context as on page 57 (Unit 7) “*When the war ended in 1781 he was happy to go back to the farm, but his country wanted him to be President.*” In addition to its meaning “*nation*”, another meaning of the word “*country*” such as “*any area outside towns and cities, with fields, woods, farms, etc.*” was also introduced (Unit 10, pp. 74-75 & 80-81). In Unit 10, students in the control group were expected to compare between life in city and country (“*The country is safer than the city.*” “*Life in the country is slower than city life.*”). Though the students in the control group had more opportunities to learn the meanings of the word than those in the experimental group, they were still confused in choosing the right meaning for the word. This might be due to teachers in the control group explaining and giving instructions mainly in English, which could cause more difficulty for the students who had not yet mastered the basic vocabulary in the range of 1-1.000. Therefore, a number of the students in the control group confused the meaning of “*country*” with “*city*”.

In brief, the results may lead one to conclude that in order to prevent the misunderstanding of the meaning of the new word; teachers should provide clear, simple, brief explanations of meaning, especially in the learners’ first language. Nation (2001) suggests that it is important to start the process of learning in a clear way without confusion when first meeting a word. By doing so, it is better to do in L1 (Lado, Baldwin & Lobo, 1967; Mishima, 1967, cited in Nation, 2001; Laufer & Shmueli, 1997). Also teachers can help learners by clearly signaling the definition they provide, by testing learners’ ability to diagnose their recognition and interpretation of definitions, and by providing training in recognizing and interpreting definition (Nation, 2001).

3.1.2 Frequent appearance after clear explanation reinforce memorization

The rate of right answer of the “Q10 *support*” for the experimental group was 98.4% as shown in Table 4; second highest after “*possible*”. Only 1.6% of students chose option “(b) *care*”, and no students chose “(a) *smile*” and “(d) *understand*”. This might be because the word *support* appeared 17 times in GE as shown in Table 2. It appeared first in Unit 7 “*My parents always support us and encourage us.*” with Lao translation and explanation. In the same unit, *support* as a verb, *support* as a noun and the noun *supporter* were introduced with examples and explanations, and repeated again in other units. This might suggest that after introducing a word with clear explanation, its frequent appearance helps students remember and ultimately memorize it.

However, “*possible*” and “*history*” which were the first and third items in the rate of right answer appeared in GE only three times and four times, respectively. This might suggest that the effect of frequency could be smaller than that of clear explanation in Lao, appearance in a simple and clear context, and memorization under the pressure of testing.

In the control group too, the rate of the right answer of “*support*” that appeared only once in NHE was the same as that of “*country*” that appeared 77 times (77.0%). This supports frequent appearance is preferable, but explanation and example are much more important.

3.2 Vocabulary in context

The result of vocabulary in the context suggested that the students in the control group had more difficulties in understanding the meaning of basic vocabulary (GSL 1-1.000) in a sentence than those in the experimental group. There was a significant difference between the experimental group and control group at the level of $p < .05$ by MANOVA (Table 1). The standardize score (T-score) was used to compare the mean scores. This is because the five items in the vocabulary-in-context part in the posttest are more difficult than those of the pretest as shown by the mean scores of 55 first year students who took both pretest and posttest at the same time. These tests are the same tests, which were used to measure the achievement of the students in both experimental and control groups. This is to check the equivalence of the two tests. The mean score of 55 students decreased from 3.3 in the pretest to 2.6 in the posttest while the standard deviation of pretest and posttest was slightly different (1.4 and 1.5, respectively).

In general, the students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group, except on item “Q15 *company*”. It should be noted that the word “*especially*” was not taught in GE and the word “*trouble*” was not taught in NHE, as shown in Table 5. Figure 2 shows the rate of right answer for each item.

There are several possible reasons why the experimental group had higher achievement than the control group. First, as seen in the part of direct translation, students in the experimental group had acquired more words more clearly. The part of word in context requires students to know most words in the given sentences (context) to guess the right answers.

Understanding of vocabulary makes a difference. Second, students in the experimental group could acquire the skill of using a word in different context. For example, in “Q12 *say*” as shown in Table 6, 18.0% of the students in control group chose “Please help it again”, instead of “Please say it again”. The students might only notice the sentence “Please help it again.” in the textbook, but they did not know that two words “help” and “say” can be used in contexts and that the word “help” needs an object “help somebody”, like “Please help me”. Finally, students in the experimental group seemed to have the skill or attitude of reading the whole sentence and guessing the right answer. This could be seen from the fact that the rate of no answer was higher in the control group in all five items as shown in Table 8. In “Q13 *quiet*” as shown in Table 7, 74.6% of students in the experimental group could reach the right answer “quiet” by reading the next sentence “He does not talk much”, but in the control group, those students who could do it was just 47.5%.

As was discussed in the previous part, it is important to clarify the second and third points in terms of how in GE, students could know the use of the words and acquired the skill and attitude of reading the whole text.

How students in the experimental group could learn the use of the word could be explained by the following reasons: the teaching of sentence pattern and functions from the beginning, and the exercise of translation from Lao to English. The first possible reason was that from Unit 1, students in the experimental group were familiar with the sentence structure. Subject + Verb + Object form first appeared in Unit 3, and was taught repeatedly. The sentence in Unit 9 on page 84 “They always say that study abroad is easy.” appeared as an example that “that clause” can be an object of the main verb. Also, an example in Unit 10, “How do you say (Lao word) in English.” attracts students’ attention that the Lao word is the object of the sentence. These examples helped students to understand that “say” takes something as an object. “Help” first appeared in Unit 7 “May I help you?” in GE. It appeared frequently like “Your assistant helps you.” (Unit 7). These examples made students aware that “help” takes somebody as an object. These examples appeared repeatedly in the exercise from Lao to English translation. Students could reinforce the use of the words in the exercise. On the other hand, in NHE, there is no explanation on the sentence pattern and function of the words. The examples are also unclear because all that follow “say” are direct speech, such as “He says: ‘Margaret likes being busy, too. ...’” (page 25 of Unit 3), in “He says ‘I’m shy, but I love giving concerts.’ He says: ‘Mozart was poor and he couldn’t play football, so I’m not like him at all!’” (Unit 6 on page 48)..., etc. In these examples, it is difficult for students to guess that the speech is the object of “say”. For “help”, there are three examples: “He helps in the shop.” (page 24 and 25 of Unit 3), “Then he helps Margaret in the shop.” (page 24 and 25 of Unit 3) and one more sentence is in the workbook of the same unit on page 15 “She helps sick people.” The latter two examples have somebody as an object. However, if students were not aware of the sentence pattern and function of object, it was probable that they did not care much about it.

The reason why the students taught in GE could develop attitude of reading the whole sentence can be explained by the exercise it required. Both oral and written exercises in GE require the students to translate the sentences in the exercises from Lao to English and from English to Lao. Through these exercises, especially exercise of English to Lao translation, students were trained to read the whole text. The translation practice from L1 to L2 and vice versa need not only be a means of internalizing new L2 words. Translation may also be used as a mean of improving skill in the combined use of lexical, syntactic and textual levels (van Els et al., 1984). On the other hand, students in the control group were not given the chance to read the whole text word by word. This could give rise to differences in the attitude of the students.

4. Conclusion

This study makes an important contribution to English Foreign Language Teaching, particularly in the area of vocabulary for students with a lower proficiency level. This study shows the effectiveness of using L1 in teaching vocabulary through translation exercises and dictation. The findings indicate that the experimental group achieved significantly better performance in both vocabulary in direct translation and vocabulary in context. These results could provide empirical support for the application of L1 in the foreign language classroom. Also checking student understanding by quiz/small test frequently or in other words, applying the technique called teach-and-test (Nation, 1990) - to teach English language help the students in the experimental group to learn better than the control group.

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Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of Pretest and Posttest

Test		Experimental group		Control group		P**
Parts (no. of items)		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Direct translation (10)	Pre	6.9	2.6	7.8	2.0	< .001
	Post	9.2	1.3	8.1	2.3	
Context (5)	Pre	48.3	11.7	47.6	12.9	< .05
	Post	52.9	9.4	47.0	10.2	

Note: * Vocabulary in context, the score is T score; ** p-value by MANOVA.

Table 2. Frequency of the Appearance of the Direct Translation Words in NHE and GE

Items	Words	NHE (times)	GE (times)
5	possible	3	3
10	support	1	17
9	history	9	4
7	early	12	24
3	begin	11	6
6	face	6	10
4	leave	18	9
1	become	4	8
8	country	77	10
2	thing	52	7

Table 3. Rate of Answer in “Q8 country”

8. country	(a) (city)	(b) (world)	(c) (capital)	(d) (country)
Group	a	b	c	d*
Experimental	11.1%	0.0%	3.2%	85.9%
Control	11.5%	3.3%	4.9%	77.0%

* Right answer

Note: The italic word in the parentheses (.....) are in Lao language

Table 4. Rate of Answer in “Q10 support”

10. support	(a)(smile)	(b) (support)	(c) (care)	(d) (understand)
Group	a	b*	c	d
Experimental	0.0%	98.4%	1.6%	0.0%
Control	0.0%	77.0%	1.6%	6.6%

* Right answer

Note: The italic word in the parentheses (.....) are in Lao language

Table 5. Frequency of the Appearance of the Words in Context in NHE and GE

Items	Words	NHE(times)	GE (times)
11	trouble	-	18
14	especially	4	-
13	quiet	6	15
12	say	32	11
15	company	3	1

Table 6. Rate of Answer in “Q12 say”

12. It is not very clear. Please () it again.				
(a) help	(b) remember	(c) say	(d) spend	
Group	a	b	c*	d
Experimental	6.3%	4.8%	88.5%	4.8%
Control	18.0%	9.8%	49.2%	4.9%

* Right answer

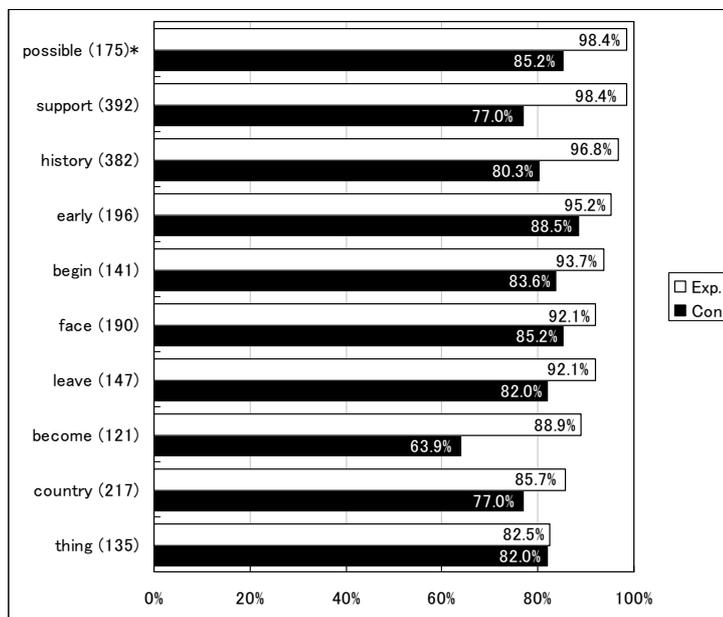
Table 7. Rate of Answer in “Q13 quiet”

13. Khambane is (). He does not talk much.				
(a) old	(b) quiet	(c) early	(d) fair	
Group	a	b*	c	d
Experimental	12.7%	74.6%	4.8%	3.2%
Control	26.2%	47.5%	9.8%	6.6%

* Right answer

Table 8. Rate of No Answer

Items	Words	Experimental	Control
11	trouble	7.9%	11.5%
14	especially	1.6%	18.0%
13	quiet	4.2%	9.8%
12	say	3.2%	3.3%
15	company	1.6%	9.8%



Note: * number in the bracket is the range of the word in GSL.

Figure 1. Percentage of Right Answer in Direct Translation

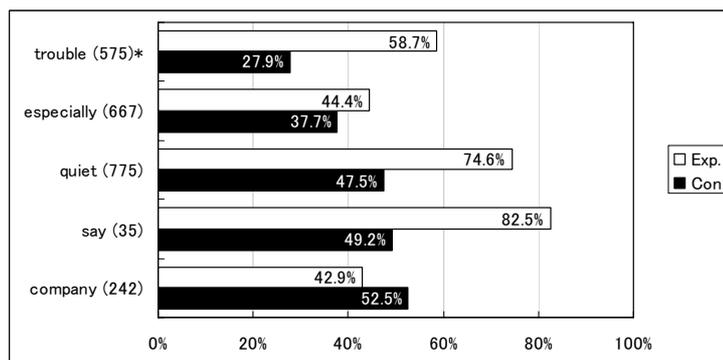


Figure 2. Achievement Item by Item in Vocabulary in Context