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**CROSS-LANGUAGE EXPLORATION:
A WAY TO EXPLORE THE USE OF L1
IN THE CLASSROOM AT A SOUTHEASTERN
MEXICAN UNIVERSITY**

**EXPLORACIÓN INTERLINGÜÍSTICA: UNA MANERA DE
EXPLORAR EL USO DEL ESPAÑOL EN EL AULA DE CLASES
EN UNA UNIVERSIDAD SUREÑA MEXICANA**

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Cross-language Exploration: a way to explore the use of L1 in the classroom at a Southeastern Mexican University

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ABSTRACT

The place of the First Language (L1), in the classroom has been studied by many researchers in relation to the advantages and disadvantages of the use of the mother tongue in foreign language (FL) courses. This study aimed at uncovering the main reasons for which participants use the L1, in this case Spanish in an EFL course and finding out students' perceptions of the use of their L1 in an EFL course. This study was carried out at a Mexican undergraduate programme. Participants were 11 students who were enrolled in a basic English course from a business and economics undergraduate programmes during the first semester of 2019. The study used a qualitative method and followed an action research design. Data were collected through observation in situ, a questionnaire and a cross-language exploration assessment task. Findings reveal that the participants have a great acceptance of the Spanish use in the English class. Most of the participants agreed that they use Spanish for different reasons: to translate vocabulary, to socialize, to ask questions, to participate, to compare answers or vocabulary, and to compare similarities and differences between L1 and EFL. All in all, the use of the Spanish is something that is always present in language courses. Despite the generalized idea of it causing detrimental effects on the target language learning; this study showed that it can render positive effects, at least at early stages of the EFL learning process.

Keywords: first language, foreign language, exploration, similarities

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Exploración Interlingüística: Una Manera de Explorar el Uso del Español en el Aula de Clases en una Universidad Sureña Mexicana

RESUMEN

El lugar del primer idioma (L1) en el aula ha sido estudiado por muchos investigadores en relación con las ventajas y desventajas de su uso en los cursos de lenguas extranjeras (LE). Este estudio tuvo como objetivo descubrir las principales razones por las cuales los estudiantes participantes usan su L1, en este caso el español, en un curso de inglés como LE y explorar las razones por las cuales estos estudiantes usan su lengua materna en un curso de inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio se llevó a cabo en un programa de pregrado mexicano. Los participantes fueron 11 estudiantes matriculados en un curso de inglés básico de un programa de licenciatura en negocios y economía durante el primer semestre de 2019. El estudio utilizó un método cualitativo y siguió un diseño de investigación-acción. Los datos se recolectaron a través de la observación in situ, un cuestionario y una actividad de exploración interlingüística. Los hallazgos revelan que los participantes tienen una gran aceptación del uso del español en la clase de inglés. Los participantes coincidieron en que usan el español para diferentes actividades: para traducir vocabulario, socializar, hacer preguntas, participar, comparar respuestas o vocabulario y comparar similitudes y diferencias entre el español y el inglés. En definitiva, el uso de la primer idioma es algo que siempre está presente en los cursos de idiomas. A pesar de la idea generalizada de que causa efectos perjudiciales en el aprendizaje de la LE en estudio; este estudio mostró que puede tener efectos positivos, al menos en las primeras etapas del aprendizaje de la LE.

Palabras clave: lengua materna, lengua extranjera, exploración, similitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) requires exposing learners to the target language (Kaygisiz, 2020; Krashen, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2007), it becomes meaningful in their level of language proficiency. The use of the first language (L1) is often banned in the EFL Mexican context but it is not possible to avoid that learners use their mother tongue in classroom at all. One of the most common teachers' concerns is that learners use the L1 in the classroom. In the Mexican context, students use the L1 to translate every word from English to Spanish or try to understand, for example, English grammar rules. Another EFL teachers' concern is how they could take advantages from this situation. How EFL teachers, can curve it to their students' benefit; and help them in their EFL language learning process. This research project aims at finding out the main reasons students have for using the L1 in an EFL course at a basic level, explore students' perceptions of the use of the L1 and carry out a cross-language activity which ask students to compare an English grammar feature using both Spanish and English and uncover how this grammar feature is used similarly and differently in both languages.

In the process of learning a foreign language, learners need to understand some aspects of the language such as vocabulary or grammar. Most of the time, in the researchers' context, learners use their native language to interact; and also to understand vocabulary and grammar. In relation to this, Lado (1957) asserts that

individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings; and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives. (p. 2).

That is to say, the L1 is used in the classroom by learners to compare; thus, this research attempts to find how to take advantages of this phenomenon that is common in many EFL classrooms, and how teachers can curve it to their advantage in the process of learning and teaching EFL. As a result, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What reasons do students have for using the L1 in a basic level course of EFL at a southeastern Mexican university?



- 2) What are students' perceptions of the use of the L1 in a basic level course of EFL at a southeastern Mexican university?
- 3) Can a cross-language exploration activity help students who are taking an EFL basic level course at a Mexican university improve their performance in the target language grammar skill?

Theoretical Background

First language use in the second language classroom

There are many researchers who have investigated about this phenomenon (Galali & Cinkara, 2017; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Lo, 2014; Costa, 2012), the use of the first language and also about techniques in teaching grammar which uses the comparison between the first and the second language patterns (Ellis, 2002; Willis & Willis, 1996). Although there are other researchers who say that EFL learners must be more exposed to FL than to the L1. That is to say, there are researchers in favor and against of using the L1 when teaching an FL. In relation to this issue, Galali and Cinkara (2017) explains that “two main opposing approaches exist regarding the impact of L1 use in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign or second language: monolingual and bilingual approaches” (p. 54). Regarding this concern, Galali and Cinkara conducted a study at a university level, and the main findings showed that students' beliefs towards monolingual approach is not at all beneficial among low-level learners; learners use the L1 when they need to understand difficult concepts, new vocabulary or to master grammatical points. This study also found that the L1 use helps students to increase learners' awareness of the similarities between L1 and the FL.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis

In addition to this, Lado (Lado, 1957 as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 89) proposes a necessary contrastive analysis of the native language and target language. It means that comparisons between the two languages in order to find similarities and differences are involved in the learning process. Lado explains the linguistic background and psychological background of this L1 transfer. The contrastive analysis hypothesis helps to compare the language and to determine potential errors because languages can differ. In this view, this learning source is very important because it describes how the cross-linguistic comparisons can be made and the possible difficulties the learners can find.

Despite this, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (henceforth CAH) claimed that “the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system” (Brown, 2000). The CAH declares that there is a negative transfer from the native language to the target language. As a matter of fact, a native English speaker can detect some foreign accents from the speech of the learners and can deduce where the speakers are from. This hypothesis emphasizes that the first language has interfered effects on the second language learning.

What is more, Moore (2013) carried out a study, at university level, which investigates contextual features surrounding the use of a first language during oral presentation tasks. This study concludes that L1 use is a naturally and productively phenomenon in the L2 classroom, as in bilingual communication. The decision of L1 use in the lessons may depend on pedagogical conditions or on specific contextual conditions. In addition to this, teachers and students need to develop an awareness and understanding of how L1 can be used naturally in the context of the classroom.

Advantages of using the L1 in the language classroom

Jadallah and Al-Quds (2010) made a review of some tendencies in the area of teaching language and defined to what extent the role of first language in EFL learning might be utilized and maximized. In this review, some advantages of L1 are mentioned, Atkinson (Atkinson, 1987 as cited in Jadallah & Al-Quds, 2010.) mentioned three reasons; learners prefer translation, to reveal their feelings and they can build differences between L1 and foreign language. Similarly, Butzkamm (2003) cites that L1 use gives a sense of security, a friendly atmosphere might be achieved, learners’ frustration might be avoided, and it might result in a more comprehensible input and faster L2 acquisition. Additionally, Sharma (2006) found that L1 was used for translating new language, giving instructions, explaining complex ideas and grammar rules (pp. 83-84). In general, many researchers argue and enhance the positive role of mother tongue and mention some of the L1 uses such as language analysis, class management, presenting grammar rules, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors and checking for comprehension. Nonetheless the use of the mother tongue should not deny learners of foreign language exposure and use.

Besides this, Kerr (2019) explains the L1 use taking into account the student and the teacher attitudes towards L1 presence in English language classroom; and the teachers’ actual use of L1 in the classroom.



Talking about the teachers' attitudes in a global figure, they believe that the L1 should be excluded from or limited in English classes. Despite this, teachers' attitudes will be shaped by a number of factors, as a result, according to a survey, the use of L1 in their classrooms is greater than their attitudes would seem to indicate. The actual use of L1 shows that there is a wide variation in the amount of mother tongue use; it depends on different own classroom characteristics.

Furthermore, Brooks and Donato (Brooks & Donato, 1994 as cited in Pan & Pan, 2010, p. 89) support that L1 permits "students to negotiate meaning and communicate successfully in the TL". Pan and Pan (2010) also claim that "switching from TL to L1 can be an effective strategy for improving student proficiency in TL if L1 is deliberately utilized in classrooms" (p. 89).

In similar manner, Neokleous (2016) focused on the students' perspectives regarding L1 integration; and investigated the perceptions of the young EFL learners by examining their attitudes towards mother tongue practice in their classrooms. Students' opinions on L1 use revealed a favourable consensus on L1 use and emphasized the advantages of using mother tongue such as learning enhancement, instilling student confidence and security; and improving classroom atmosphere.

Banning the L1 use in language classrooms for decades

Littlewood and Yu (2011) refer how foreign language teaching, for many decades, has been dominated by the principle that the teachers should exclude the use of L1 and use only the target language. Nonetheless they illustrate a framework of principles for balancing L1 and TL use in the classroom. These principles are focused on specific goals of L1 like core goals or framework goals. They also provide some available techniques which help to maximize the TL, but at the same time they can take advantages from the L1 to support the foreign language learning process. They assert that mother tongue should be an ally if it is used "systematically, selectively and correctly" (Littlewood & Yu, 2011, p. 75). Some researchers found disadvantages of the use of the first language in the classroom. In particular, Turnbull (Turnbull, 2001 as cited in Thompson and Harrison, 2014, p. 323) stated that "licensing teachers to speak the L1 in their SL (second language) or FL classes will lead to an overuse of the L1 by many teachers". What is more, Polio and Duff (Polio & Duff, 1994 as cited in Thompson and Harrison, 2014, p. 323) said that teacher uses the first language when there is a lack of student



comprehension, but they suggest that it happens because “teachers may lack the necessary experience or strategy to rephrase or otherwise modify their speech”.

Pan and Pan (2010) explain that L1 use is a common incident in foreign language contexts; in spite of this, the phenomenon has received a lot of criticism because some researchers consider that the L1 interferes in the second language acquisition. Their argument is derived from theoretical perspectives and empirical research within existing literature supporting the appropriate use of L1 in foreign language classrooms. This argument mentions three important issues: the rationales for L1 use, positive effects L1 has on both foreign language learning and instruction; and ways that L1 assists instructors on foreign languages. As a conclusion, this paper emphasizes that the use of L1 is justified for different reasons to facilitate the learning of an L2; and the quantity of L1 is not defined because it is determined by students’ proficiency levels and teaching purposes.

In Content and Language Integrated Learning Classrooms, Lo (2014) describes the debate over the L1 and L2 in CLIL. It is explained by using several arguments. This study has observed that in CLIL classrooms where students’ L2 proficiency is not suitable, teachers have used the L1 to assist students in understanding specific technical terms and difficult concepts. The study also seeks to answer if teachers can use L1 appropriately to suit their students’ needs. The analysis of this study shows that when teaching students with limited L2 proficiency; teachers used a significant proportion of L1 in lessons to explain the subject content, interact with students and develop students’ L2 metalinguistic awareness. The use of L1 in this specific context is considered as a linguistic resource to help students to have a better understanding of the abstract content knowledge and to facilitate L2 learning (Costa, 2012).

A cross-language exploration activity

Considering all these arguments in favor of the use the L1 in the foreign language teaching; a specific activity was chosen to be implemented in an English class from university level. The activity is called Cross-language exploration activity, this is just one of the several activities that are part of the Consciousness-Raising (Henceforth C-R) activities proposed by Willis and Willis (1996). C-R is defined as the intentional isolation of a specific linguistic feature and draw students’ attention to it as for raising their consciousness of this linguistic element; this, in turn, might facilitate students’

recognition of it in subsequent tasks. (Willis & Willis, 1996; Fotos, 1994). This cross-language exploration activity was thought to help to answer the research questions of this project. As stated before, the main goal is to use Spanish as an advantageous tool for raising students' English grammar awareness. Cross-language exploration activity focuses students' attention on a particular feature of the L2; that is grammar, and exploits the use of the L1 to understand this issue. To put it in another way, Spanish is used for special reason; it means that the use of native language might result in students' L2 improvements. Willis & Willis (1996) explain that the benefits of this type of activity might positively influence students during all their process of learning a language. They claim that students are encouraged "to observe and analyze language for themselves... and to make sense of language and systematize it" (p. 15).

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Type of research

This is a qualitative research based on a specific situation in the researchers' professional practice. In other words, it has an action research design. Ferrance (2000) defines action research as "the process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully" (p. 1). The main characteristic of the action research is that the researcher is involved in the process; the researcher is in need of improving his or her teaching context and the students' learning context. The scope of this work is descriptive, in a descriptive study, researchers select certain aspects of a phenomenon under study and collect information about these aspects (Hernández et al., 2006). In the case of this work, researchers sought to find out the students' reasons for using the L1 in an EFL course.

Situational context and participants

Participating students were 11 young Mexican people, from 17 to 19 years old; five were women and six were men. They were enrolled in a basic level of English as a foreign language course during the first semester of 2019. These university students were studying different undergraduate programmes such as Economics, Administration, Accounting and Marketing. All of them speak Spanish as their L1; most of them came from the Southeast region of this country. As for their background as EFL learners, ten of them came from public high schools and just one graduated from a private high school. Participants who studied in public high schools took EFL at secondary and high school levels.

Regarding the sample selection, at the time of carrying out this research project, there were three groups taking a basic level of EFL at the faculty where this research was conducted. Initially, researchers aimed at including these three groups as participants of this project; nevertheless, when the researchers asked for the three teachers' consent, only one of them accepted to participate. The ones who did not accept to participate gave different reasons such as time constraints and content coverage issues. In the end, researchers ended up with a sample of just one group of 11 participants.

Talking about the ethical issues, some ethics documents were prepared to all the participants to ask for their consent to participate in the project. These consent documents were handed in to the principal of the faculty, students, area coordinator of English, and the English teacher as well. It was important to explain them the reason of this research project and the positive impact on the English teaching practice. Participants were informed about the project, data, and assured them that participants' identity was to be treated confidentially. Finally, they signed in their consent documents.

Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments for this research were an observation rubric, a questionnaire, a cross-language exploration task and the assessment of the cross-language exploration task. These instruments were chosen because, first of all, this action research project required observation about why and how often students use the L1. Secondly, it was also relevant to know the students' ideas or beliefs and perceptions about the use of Spanish in the English class. Lastly, it was necessary to obtain evidence of the use of the L1 in class; consequently, a cross-language exploration task assessment was carried out. In relation to the observation technique (head counting), they were carried out by the researchers during four sessions, during the month of February: 21, 22, 26 and 28 February. Each session was scheduled for 60 minutes; nonetheless, each session varied: session one lasted 60 minutes, session two lasted 50 minutes, session three and four lasted 45 minutes each. During the observation stage, researchers used a matrix created *ex profeso* to keep record, in situ, of both the time in which the L1 was used in the classroom and the reasons for using it. The main objective of the observation was to know the frequency of mother tongue use and in what circumstances they used the L1. For example, if students used L1 to socialize, to ask teachers, to participate, to compare answers with their classmates or ask about the teacher's instructions, to understand grammar and to check vocabulary. So, every time a student used

the L1 in the class, the observers kept record of the time and the reason for using it. At the end of the four-session observation period, there were four matrices showing the time and the reasons the students had for using Spanish in the class during this time period.

Talking about the questionnaire, it was administered to the 11 participants the following session after the observation period: 1 March 2019. Students were asked to answer it using 15 minutes before finishing the session. The main objective of this questionnaire was twofold, first explore the participants' awareness of the use of the L1; and triangulate their answers with the results of the observation. It was written and administered to students in English. The researchers were aware that students were at a basic level of the L2; therefore, the questionnaire was limited to only five questions and all of them were of multiple options in which students just chose the option that best suited them. It asked learners about their preferences in relation to the use of Spanish throughout the class for several purposes, such as the use Spanish to socialize, to compare their answers, vocabulary, to translate, to ask questions, to participate or to find similarities or differences between Spanish and English. Moreover, it asked if they thought Spanish was beneficial during the English class and if they preferred their teacher speaks Spanish for explaining the topic, the grammar, the vocabulary; or for answering their questions, doubts and/or for checking the answers of the exercises.

A cross-language exploration task was implemented as well. This cross-language exploration task aimed at providing students with an opportunity to use Spanish to understand EFL grammar; and to confirm or reject that learners can truly improve EFL grammar. This Cross-language exploration activity focused students' attention on a specific feature of grammar, in this case, the verb *to be* for expressing age. This topic was chosen given that it was the one scheduled for the session in which this cross-language exploration task was implemented. Additionally, during the observation period researchers overheard some students saying "I have 19 years old". This is a common mistake for Spanish speakers even at an intermediate level of EFL.

The task consisted of reading a five-line paragraph about famous people in which the instances of verb *be* were enhanced and eventually participants answered four questions. To answer the questions, participants had to discuss if they used the same structure in Spanish to say the age; and they tried to

make up the rule. Of course, students spoke in Spanish to discuss the use of verb *to be* in the activity; even so the objective was to improve students' FL understanding in this particular grammar feature.

At the end of the cross-language exploration activity, an assessment task was implemented to ensure that students properly understood and increased grammar awareness. The assessment included five questions demanding the use of verb *to be* when it is used to express age, translating some sentences about age into Spanish and finding out similarities and differences of the way age is expressed in English and Spanish.

Throughout the cross-language exploration activity implementation and assessment, students were observed if they showed positive response, if they were engaged in the activity and if they participated actively; and in fact, if they used the L1 to understand the differences and similarities of the grammar patterns of the verb *to be*.

The data analysis

For the analysis of the data, no software was used. All the data gathered was processed, categorized and analysed manually by the researchers as follows. First, researchers organized the data in three categories: the data from the observation, from the questionnaire and from the assessment task.

As for the observation data, researchers carefully observed the four observation matrices and proceeded to categorize the participants' reasons for using the L1. This categorization led to the codification stage; here similarities and differences were observed. In this way, common categories were inducted. One by one, L1 uses recorded in the matrices were observed, compared and contrasted.

At the end of this categorization process six categories were revealed:

- 1) To socialize
- 2) To participate
- 3) To compare answers
- 4) To ask the teacher
- 5) To understand grammar
- 6) To check vocabulary

Finally, these common categories along with corresponding responses were tabulated to make the data more manageable.

The data obtained from the questionnaire followed the same analysis procedure. Question by question the researcher kept record of the number of times each option was chosen and proceeded to keep tally of each in a chart. Similarities and differences were found among answers provided by students to induct categories. Eventually, seven categories were found:

- 1) To socialize
- 2) To compare answers
- 3) To compare vocabulary
- 4) To translate vocabulary
- 5) To ask questions
- 6) To participate
- 7) To find out similarities between L1 and L2

In order to reveal the participants' performance in the cross-language exploration activity, the researchers needed to analyse their answers in it. one by one, the students' answers were sorted out as correct or incorrect. At the end of this classification, the number of students who provided correct and incorrect answers was shown.

Regarding the assessment of the cross-language exploration task, observing, comparing, contrasting, analysing and categorizing the answers followed a straightforward step: for questions one and two, the number of correct and incorrect answers were recorded and tabulated. For questions three, four and five responses were grouped based on similarities among them. The results derived from this data analysis are presented in the following section.

RESULTS

Results of the class observation

The next table shows in which situations students used Spanish during the 60-minute class. The observation was organized in 5-minute blocks and the number of times they used the L1 was counted.

Table 1. Situations in which students use Spanish in the classroom during the observation stage

Use of Spanish	Session 1 (60 mins)	Session 2 (50 mins)	Session 3 (45 mins)	Session 4 (45 mins)	Total each reason
To socialize	11	10	9	8	38 (22%)
To participate	6	1	8	4	19 (11%)
To compare answers	8	9	8	12	37(21%)
To ask teacher	9	8	6	5	28(16%)
To understand grammar	2	4	12	0	18(10%)
To check vocabulary	21	10	1	2	34(20%)
Total use of L1 each session	57	42	44	31	Σ 174

Source: created by the author

In each session the amount of use of Spanish varies. In session one, there was a total of 57 times in which students used Spanish in the class, Spanish was mainly used to check vocabulary with 21 times, this makes a 36.8% of the frequency. The second aspect was to socialize with 11 times, making a total of 29%; the third most used criteria was to ask the teacher with 9 instances that makes over 15%.

In the session number 2, Spanish was also used to check vocabulary with 10 times that makes a 23.8% and to socialize with 10 times too. The third aspect was to compare answers with 9 times, making a total of 21.4%. There was a total of 42 times in which learners use Spanish in a 60-minute session.

In session number 3, L1 was used 43 times throughout the whole class. The first most used feature was to understand grammar with 12 times which makes the 27.9% of the total. The second one was to socialize with 9 times; that is the 20.9% of incidences. The third aspect was to socialize with 8 instances, this makes over 18.6%.

In the session 4, Spanish was used by learners 31 times. 12 out of the 31 occurrences were used to compare answers that means the 38.7% of the total. 8 times were used to socialize which means the 25.8%. And the third aspect was to ask the teacher about any aspect of the class, this represents the 16.1% of the total amount of L1 incidences.

Results of the questionnaire

The next section shows the students' answers to the questionnaire in reference to the use of Spanish during the class. This questionnaire consisted of 5 questions.

The first question asked the students if they use the Spanish in class. They were provided with seven options; and were asked to tick (√) if they use it and cross out (×) if they do not use it.

Question 1: In which of the following situations do you use Spanish during your class?

Table 2. Situations for students' use of Spanish during the questionnaire stage

Situations in which L1 is used in class	No. of students answering YES	No. of students answering NO
To socialize	8	3
To compare answers	7	4
To compare vocabulary	7	4
To translate vocabulary	9	2
To ask questions	8	3
To participate	8	3
To find out similarities between L1 and L2	5	6

Source: created by the authors

This table shows that most students tend to use Spanish to translate vocabulary, nine out of 11. The second highest options were to socialize, to ask questions and to participate with eight students each respectively. The third most chosen option was to compare answers and to compare vocabulary with seven students each. Finally, only five students chose the option to find out similarities between L1 and target language. For this last option, most of the students, six out of 11, answered that they do not use Spanish to find similarities between L1 and the FL.

Question 2 was as follows

Do you think that the use of Spanish during your English class is

a) very useful; b) useful; c) not useful?

The tally of answers to this second question shows that 45.5% of the students (n=5) claimed that the first language is very useful in their English class and 54.5% of the students (n=6) say that Spanish is useful in their classes. None of the participants considers the use of the Spanish as not useful.

Question 3: Do you prefer that your teacher speaks Spanish when...

a) explaining the topic;



- b) explaining the vocabulary;
- c) explaining grammar;
- d) checking answers of the exercises;
- e) answering your doubts?

It is convenient to highlight the fact that for this question, participants could choose more than one of the options provided.

Table 3. Reasons for which students prefer their teacher uses Spanish in the classroom

	Explaining the Topic	Explaining the vocabulary	Explaining grammar	Checking the answers to the exercises	Answering Doubts
<i>No. of students</i>	7	3	6	3	9

Source: created by the authors

Students' answers display that the vast majority, nine out of 11, is in favour of teacher answering their doubts using Spanish. The second highest chosen option was: explaining the topics. Seven out of 11 participants preferred the teacher to use Spanish to explain the topic being taught in a lesson. Six students opted for teacher explaining grammar in Spanish. Only three students picked up the options of using L1 for explaining the vocabulary. Lastly, only three participants selected the option of using the Spanish for checking the answers to the exercises implemented in class.

Question 4: Do you think that comparing the grammar rules of both Spanish and English languages will help you understand the rules of the English language?

Students' answers to question 4 show that 9 out of 11 students (81.8%) think that the comparison between English grammar rules to the rules of Spanish will help them to understand the rules of the FL. Only two students (18.2%) claimed that the comparison will not help them to understand the rules.

Question 5: Would you like that your teacher shows similarities between the Spanish and English language?

In this last question, the 100% of the students answered that they would prefer their teacher shows similarities between English and Spanish.



Results of the Cross-language exploration activity

For this task, students started reading a paragraph which introduced the specific feature of grammar, *verb to be in present simple*. In the first question, the exercise focused students' attention on the verb to be and students analyzed the use of this verb in each underlined sentence. 100% of students answered that "is" used for singular and "are" for plural. The second question highlighted two sentences from the exercise and asked students to write the similar meaning in Spanish. Nine out of eleven students wrote the sentences correctly. Finally, for items three and four, they tried to make up the rules; 100% of the participants answered that "is" for singular and "are" for plural. They also explained that it is not just for expressing age but nationality, marital status, or name. Of course, they discussed and wrote their answers in Spanish.

Results of the Assessment of the Cross-language exploration activity

An assessment of this activity was truly necessary to have an overview of students' understandings. The aim was to confirm if the use of Spanish during the activity was an advantageous resource and if the L1 really helped students to raise grammar awareness. The assessment asked several questions about the use of the verb "to be" and the equivalent in Spanish. Students discussed and analyzed each question and wrote their answers in Spanish.

In the first question, all the students answered that the equivalent of the verb "to be" in Spanish, when it is used to express age, is the verb "tener". In the question number 2, students wrote the translation in Spanish of each sentence. The 11 students wrote the three sentences correctly, using the right verb in Spanish to express age.

In the question 3, the answers expressed that students do not use the Spanish equivalent of the verb to be to express age as it is used in English. In the question number 4, learners did not answer comprehensibly; just one pair of students claimed that the verbs are similar because they express the age. In the last question, 5, nine out of 11 students answered that the verb in English and the verb in Spanish to express age are different because the verb in English is the verb "to be" and in Spanish is the verb "tener". In addition, two pairs of students answered that the verbs are written in a different way.



DISCUSSION

The use of Spanish in the English class has a relevant presence in the learners' learning process. The outcomes of this research show that learners used Spanish for various purposes. Using the observation results learners used Spanish during their English lessons for example to check vocabulary, to understand grammar, to compare their answers or to socialize. The objective of each class is important because it defines the reason for the use of the L1. For example, when the lesson was focused on vocabulary, the students used the L1 to check vocabulary. This finding is similar to the ones reported by Liu et al. (2004) who found that L1 is commonly used when grammar and vocabulary are considered difficult (as cited in Littlewood and Yu, 2011). Besides this, Prince (1996) asserts that when introducing the meaning of new words, the use of L1 might be beneficial to the learners' understanding (as cited in Pan & Pan, 2010).

The results here obtained might be due to students' low level in the target language; they might not have enough vocabulary to come their ideas across in English. They also feel more confident to socialize in Spanish. As a consequence, learners had a positive attitude towards the use of Spanish during their foreign language classes. They also preferred that teacher uses Spanish to explain the topic or to explain grammar rules. Students believed that this may help them to improve their English knowledge. In relation to this, Cook (2001) explains that "L1 should be used for grammar instruction because lower-proficiency students possess little TL linguistic information..." (as cited in Pan & Pan, 2010, p. 92)

The findings in this research have several implications, first, it seems that from the students' perspective, the use of the L1, in this case Spanish, is really important to them and should have a place in the different lessons' stages: planning and implementing. It somehow challenges the traditional view of banning the use of the L1 in language lessons. Secondly, the use of Spanish might be integrated by the teachers in a controlled way through different activities. In other words, the use of Spanish should have a positive purpose so that learners understand and acquire the second language knowledge. In this case, this research implemented the activity proposed by Willis and Willis (1996), Cross-language exploration activity. They assert that "the outcomes of these operations will be an increased awareness of and sensitivity to language" (p. 7).



The main objective of all this technique is to exploit or take advantages of the first language. The context and the students' needs or their level of the second language will determine how the L1 will be used. During the observation stage, throughout their lessons, students used Spanish most of the time for socializing, for comparing answers, and for checking vocabulary. This result differs to a certain extent from the result derived from the questionnaire which shows that students mostly used Spanish for translating vocabulary, then for asking questions, for participating and for socializing. In general, in the questionnaire students expressed that Spanish is very important in their lessons; they preferred that the teacher answers their doubts using the mother tongue and all of them also liked teacher explaining grammar and showing similarities in Spanish. This result is similar to the Neokleous' (2016) study which revealed that students have a positive attitude towards the use of mother tongue; students emphasize its advantages in their lesson for example to understand in deep and to ensure comprehension specially in grammar explanation.

Taking into account the results from the observation stage and students' answers from the questionnaire, learners mainly used Spanish for socializing but they said that the teacher should use Spanish to show the likeness between Spanish and English. Students clearly stated that they are in favour of using Spanish to explain grammar rules. Similarly, Neokleous (2016) found that more than 80% of the students prefer teachers integrate L1 in FL grammar explanation and explain "relationships between the two languages" (p. 329).

During the implementation of the Cross-language exploration activity, Spanish was used for several purposes. Learners did not just used Spanish to find similarities or differences between the L1 and the FL, that is the purpose of the activity. They used Spanish to ask their teacher about some doubts in relation to the use of the verbs, to discuss their answers with their partners and to participate in this class. As a result, this outcome contrasts with students' answer from the questionnaire which points out that they usually translate vocabulary into Spanish. Moreover, during the cross-language exploration activity implemented in this study, students rarely checked vocabulary; they focused their attention on the grammar topic.

During the assessment task of the cross-language exploration activity, learners used Spanish for the same purpose as in the implementation of the cross-language exploration activity: the use of Spanish

was to understand how some specific features of language were used, in the case of this study, the verb to be to express age. Based on the answers provided, students were aware of the differences of the grammar pattern of *verb to be* in L1 and EFL when it is used to express age. It seems that a cross-language exploration task really helps students to improve grammar of the target language, at least at basic levels.

This finding is truly interesting as it might indicate that L1 can be used as a resource for English language teachers teaching basic courses of English. Instead of prohibiting its use, in the case of teachers; and limiting its use, in the case of students; both sides can agree on the best use, moment and purpose of the L1 use during the course, all in the benefit of students' progress. Galali and Cinkara (2017) endorses this view and state that a balanced approach between monolingual and bilingual approach is necessary which recognizes the L1 as an advantageous tool and tolerance with learners L1 is needed especially with low-level learners. He suggests establishing restrictions of use of L1 when students build confidence in performing the target language.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this research showed that the participants used the L1 in the EFL course for different reasons: to socialize with classmates, to participate in class, to compare their answers to the activities they carry out in class, to compare vocabulary meaning they encounter in the material used as input, to translate the vocabulary they do not know, to ask questions to the teacher, to understand grammar of the L2 and to find out similarities and differences between the L1 and L2.

It also showed the arguments in favour of using Spanish and proposed a cross-language exploration activity which focused students' attention on the use of Spanish to increase grammar awareness and consequently to improve FL performance. Based on the results, it is safe to conclude that using Spanish in English classes for beginners impacts positively on students and helps to increase their level of confidence when performing in English. Furthermore, this study revealed that students see the use of the L1 as a resource and not as a something they need to avoid at all times. They have a positive perception of it. Thus, the use of L1 in basic level of EFL can be considered as an advantage rather than the opposite.



Derived from the results obtained, some recommendations arise; firstly, it is important to provide a place or stage for mother tongue in EFL classes. Providing a place for the L1 has to start at the planning stage of a lesson. If the use of the L1 is to be maximised, there is no room for improvisation during a lesson. Secondly, from the teachers' perspective, it might be necessary to start looking at the L1 as another resource it is at the disposal instead of keep seeing it as detrimental for EFL courses. Thirdly, to design activities with specific reasons to use L1 that truly help students to develop EFL knowledge. Fourthly, to avoid the monotony in the use of L1 teachers can use all the consciousness-raising awareness activities proposed by Willis & Willis (1996) such as identify/consolidate, classify (semantic or structural), hypothesis building/checking, cross-language, exploration, reconstruction/deconstruction and reference training.

Kerr (2019) proposes some classroom management techniques that enable teachers to restrict the use of L1 and to foster more opportunities for the use of English. These techniques are “sandwiching”, to use bilingual technique to give instructions and own-language moments which allow students to use their first language for certain moments. Kerr (2019) suggests some learning tools that learners can use for example online translation, dictionaries, flashcards, and other bilingual resources like websites or apps (grammar videos, interactive games or translated song lyrics). Kerr (2019) mentions other specific classroom activity types including contrastive analysis activities where the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of English and the L1 are directly compared, study of transfer effects, bilingual roleplays, bilingual writing, using bilingual resources to prepare students for English texts, responding in L1 to English for English texts, making use of bilingual glossaries and exploited dubbed and subtitled videos. Concerning to the limitations of this research project, the first one relates to the generalizability of the results; the number of students surveyed it is very small, so it is difficult to generalize the results obtained to all the EFL courses in the university where this research was conducted. Moreover, the questionnaire was of multiple options which means that students' responses were limited to these options. If students had been free to provide their answers, they might have come out with answers different to the options given in the questionnaire.

What is more, the time frame to carry out this research project was very short; thus, again there might be many more reasons for using the L1 in an EFL course than the ones here obtained during the



observation period. Another limitation relates to the teachers' perceptions and perspectives. The EFL Teacher's perceptions regarding the use of the L1 in an EFL course were not explored in this research, not doubts teachers' perceptions must be taken into account to have a full overview of the phenomenon under study. Another important limitation deals with the implementation of the cross-language exploration activity and the assessment stage: due to the students' language proficiency level, the questions should have been presented in Spanish or used bilingual questions (English-Spanish). These improvements might have helped students to provide more accurate and therefore more reliable answers during the stages above mentioned.

Further studies pertaining to the use of the L1 in EFL courses should seek to answer the following questions:

- 1) How much L1 should be allowed to use in an EFL course for beginners who have Spanish as their L1?
- 2) Should L1 be used in more advanced EFL courses? If so, how much?
- 3) What are EFL teachers' perceptions of the use of L1 in L2 courses for beginners?
- 4) What are EFL teachers' perceptions of the use of L1 in L2 courses for advanced students?
- 5) What are stakeholders' perceptions of the use of L1 in L2 courses?

These are a few of the many questions that need to be explored to make an informed decision that really helps the students to thrive.

Every EFL course is different from others and decisions about the use of the L1 should be tailor-made to fit a particular group. As showed by the results, students use the L1 for different reasons; however, it is true that L1 cannot be used at all stages of a lesson, then, teachers need to plan proactively and decide which stage of the lesson the students need to use the L1 the most.

All in all, an EFL course cannot be taught entirely in the L1 but there should be a place for it: where students need it the most and where it is more beneficial to them.

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