

## **The Effects of Students' L1 on Learning English Linguistics at USSH-HCMC, Vietnam**

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*The use of students' L1 in an EFL context has always been controversial. This paper reports how the moderate use of students' L1 in the classroom can actually enhance their understanding of the subject matter. It describes the learning process of a class of 44 students majoring in Russian with a minor in English, taking an Introduction to Linguistics course at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities - HCMC in Vietnam for fifteen weeks (60 periods). The students' translanguaging practices proved to be effective in assisting their acquisition of the subject material.*

**Keywords:** *CLL, EFL context, translanguaging*

### **Introduction**

This paper describes a linguistics course taught in an EFL context. In HoChiMinh City, Vietnam, Vietnamese is, by law, the official language, though in many aspects, HoChiMinh City can be considered as a bilingual city. Since the enactment of the economic open-door policy “đổi mới” by the government of Vietnam in 1986, English has become increasingly popular (Denham, 1992; Mydans, 1995; Nguyễn, 1992, Shapiro, 1995; Wilson, 1993a, b). In contrast, Russian lost its popularity after unification in 1975 and enrollment of students majoring in the Russian language has decreased remarkably. In an effort to increase enrollment for the faculty of Russian Linguistics and Literature, a bilingual Russian-English program came into existence. It is a five-year program and, after graduation, students receive a Bachelor in the Russian Language and an Associate Degree in the English Language.

In the bilingual Russian-English program, students are required to take Introduction to Linguistics in English. Even though they have studied General Linguistics in Vietnamese and Russian, studying this subject matter in the English language proves challenging for them. This paper argues that using translanguaging as pedagogy proved to be beneficial in assisting students' acquisition of the subject material.

### **Background and Context**

This course is a “theoretical course of sixty hours which provides students with an overview of the origin of language, and the framework of phonology and phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics” (course syllabus by Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature). Students taking this course should have a basic knowledge of Linguistics and have completed all basic language skills courses. The required textbook is the first ten chapters of the book “The study of language” (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), by George Yule (2010). There are two main assessments: the midterm, which makes up thirty percent of the final grade, and the final test, which makes up seventy percent of the final grade. The midterm score is further divided into a written midterm test which makes up sixty percent of the grade, an oral presentation which makes up twenty percent and participation and exercises which make up the remaining twenty percent of the grade. For the oral group presentation, students are required to summarize and synthesize the key points from the assigned readings. Their presentations should be fifteen minutes in length and the presenting group is also responsible for answering questions related to the readings. The aim of the midterm test and final exam is to check if students have obtained a good understanding of the overview of the origin of language, are familiar with common terms of phonology and phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, and can apply basic knowledge of language in using language. The format of the mid-term test is two or three theory questions, and three practice questions, and lasts about 30-45 minutes. The format of the final exam is thirty percent theory questions on the history and function of language, seventy percent practice questions on using language, such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and lasts about 60-90 minutes.

### **Translanguaging as Pedagogy**

Translanguaging can be considered as “a distinct pedagogic theory and practice that varies the language of input and output but with ‘dual-language’ processing for deeper learning” (Williams, 2012, as cited in García & Wei, 2014, p. 91).

“Teacher-directed translanguaging” can also be a “transformative pedagogy” in the way that teachers can engage students holistically and individually “to ensure that all students are being cognitively, socially and creatively challenged, while receiving the appropriate linguistic input and producing adequate linguistic output in meaningful interactions and collaborative dialogue” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 92). “Teacher-directed translanguaging” is crucial in allowing students to learn meaningfully and to keep their “dynamic languaging” (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Creese and Blackledge (2010, p. 108) contend

Both languages are needed simultaneously to convey the information,...  
each language is used to convey a different informational message, but it

is in the bilingualism of the text that the full message is conveyed.

The combination of the two languages can keep “the task moving forward” (Creese and Blackledge, 2010: 110).

When translanguaging is used “strategically as a scaffolding approach” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 92), it can enable students to “engage with rigorous content, access difficult texts”. As García and Wei (2014, p. 93) point out, “translanguaging as pedagogy involves leveraging, that is, deliberately and simultaneously merging students’ repertoires of practice”. In this way, translanguaging makes the learner take control of his/her language practices to access texts and knowledge. On the contrary, teachers yield their authority role in the classroom and become facilitators “to set up the project-based instruction and collaborative groupings that maximize translanguaging to learn” (2014, p. 93). Translanguaging hence has “pedagogical value”, since it is used “both as part of [teachers] linguistic toolkit for academic content learning and to valorize and promote pride in students’ ethnolinguistic identities” (Sayer, 2008, p. 110, as cited in García & Wei, 2014, p. 93)

### Method

Our interest in this topic was triggered by the information obtained from the weekly feedback of the group of 44 students in the bilingual Russian-English program. Since this is the students’ last year, they were not very motivated in learning, but more interested in getting a good grade. That is why they did all they could to achieve good marks.

The policy of the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature is that teachers should use English as the medium of instruction. The objective of this is to expose students to the target language as much as possible. However, in the feedback in the second week of the course, the students asked me to use Vietnamese so that they could understand the concepts better. From then on, I usually asked them whether they understood what was going on in class or not; if not, I switched to Vietnamese to explain the linguistic concepts.

### Results

Below are the results of the midterm test (see appendix 1) and final exam (see appendix 2) of this group. Both were graded with 10 being the maximum grade.

Scores	Midterm test	Percentage	Final exam	Percentage
9-10	2	4.5		
8-8.9	4	9	13	29.5
7-7.9	14	32	18	41
6-6.9	9	20	9	20
5-5.9	9	20	3	7

4-4.9	4	9	1	2.3
3-3.9				
2-2.9	2	4.5		

As can be seen from the above table, students did much better in their final exam. Only one student did not pass the final exam while six of them did not pass the midterm test. Though none of them got 9 in the final test, the number of those who got 7-8.9 rose remarkably from 41% to 70%. The good results in the final exam seem to be related to the effectiveness of translanguaging approach to this complicated and theoretical subject of Linguistics.

### Conclusion

Adopting translanguaging to teach in this context appears to significantly assist students in acquiring the content of Linguistics in the English language. The evidence from the students' feedback and the results of their grades affirm that moderate use of L1 in an EFL classroom can maximize students' understanding of a complex subject.

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**Appendix 1** Midterm test

University of Social Sciences and Humanities

Name:

Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature

ID

number:

**MID-TERM in INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LINGUISTICS**

Duration: 45 minutes

***I. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) (2m)***

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The innateness hypothesis proposes that human infants are born with a special capacity for language not shared with any other creature and that this capacity is genetically determined.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ This process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next is described as cultural transmission.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Reflexivity accounts for the fact that human beings can use language to communicate.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ /v/ can be defined as a voiceless labiodentals fricative.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Arbitrariness is the case that there is “natural” connection between a linguistic form and its meaning.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Communicative signals are not synonymous to unintentionally informative signals.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Displacement is the property that allows language users to talk about things and events present in the immediate environment.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Phonotactics refer to the constraints in the types of sound combinations permitted in a language.

***II. Which written English words are usually pronounced as they are transcribed here? (1.5m)***

1. / [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]		3. [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]		5. / [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]	
2. [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]		4. [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]		6. / [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]	

***III. Write a basic phonetic transcription of the most common pronunciation of the following words. (1.5m)***

1. host		3. machine		5. pleasure	
2. coffee		4. varied		6. knowledge	

*IV. Give 4 words that begin with a voiceless alveolar sound and end with a nasal sound. (1m)*

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_

*V. Which of the following words would be treated as minimal pairs? (1m)*

bag, debt, farm, fun, had, hut, head, palm, set, sang, said.

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_

*VI. Identify the manner of articulation of the initial sounds in the following words (stop, fricative, etc.) (1m)*

1 snap \_\_\_\_\_ 2. park \_\_\_\_\_ 3. judge \_\_\_\_\_ 4. misty \_\_\_\_\_

*VII. Identify the different word-formation processes involved in producing each of the underlined words in the following sentences. (1m)*

1. I asked the waitress for another spork. \_\_\_\_\_

2. This is waterproof. \_\_\_\_\_

3. What did the doc say?. \_\_\_\_\_

4. Their counterargument is annoying. \_\_\_\_\_

*VIII. Consider the following examples: what do you think the corresponding Indonesian words would be for "honest", "happy", "just/fair" and "satisfied"? (1m)*

ketidakjujuran ("dishonesty")	_____
ketidaksenangan ("unhappiness")	_____
ketidakadilan ("injustice")	_____
ketidakpuasan ("dissatisfaction")	_____

**NO DICTIONARY OR MATERIAL IS ALLOWED**

**Appendix 2 Final Exam**



VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY-HO CHI MINH CITY  
 UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES  
 FACULTY OF ENGLISH LINGUISTICS & LITERATURE  
 DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

Student Name: .....

Student ID: .....

Class: .....

**Final Exam in INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LINGUISTICS**

**Time allowed: 60 minutes**

**Test date:**

Approved by Dept. Chair <i>(name &amp; signature)</i>	Lecturer(s) <i>(name)</i>	Proctor 1 <b>(CBCT 1)</b> <i>(name &amp; signature)</i>	Proctor 2 <b>(CBCT 2)</b> <i>(name &amp; signature)</i>	Examiner <i>(name &amp; signature)</i>	Written project	Final exam	Total score <b>100%</b>

Notes: *No materials or dictionaries are allowed.*

*Students write their answers in the same test paper.*

**I. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F). (2 marks)**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Duality is a property of human language that states human language is organized at two levels or layers simultaneously.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ The genetic source proposes that human beings are born with a special capacity to acquire language.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Substituting one allophone for another changes both pronunciation and meaning.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ /g/ is a voiced velar liquid.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Etymology is “the study of the origins and histories of words”.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Derivational morphemes are bound morphemes that are used make new words or to make words of a different grammatical category from the stem.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Grammatical gender is based on sex of nouns.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Metonymy is based on implicit comparison of words.

**II. For each of the following symbols provide the correct phonetic label and a word that begins with that sound. The first one has been done as an example. (1 mark)**

0. /n/: a voiced alveolar nasal. Example: nice
1. /s/:.....
2. /b/:.....
3. /f/:.....
4. /l/:.....

**III. Find another word to finish the minimal pairs. The first one has been done as an example. (1 mark)**



- 0. sheep                  leap
- 1. cart .....
- 2. rip.....
- 3. race.....
- 4. wrong.....

**IV. Identify the word-formation process(es) involved in producing each of the underlined words in the following sentences. (1 mark)**

- 1. Long time no see, hru?  
.....
- 2. Could you please upload the materials you use in class?  
.....
- 3. What did the prof say?  
.....
- 4. Yeah, karaoke time.  
.....  
.....

**V. Identify the number of morphemes in each of the given words. (1 mark)**

*E.g. cheaper     \_2*

- 1. children \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. ran \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. description \_\_\_\_\_

4. inseparability \_\_\_\_\_

5. inquiries \_\_\_\_\_

6. retake \_\_\_\_\_

7. retire \_\_\_\_\_

8. spaciouly \_\_\_\_\_

**VI. Identify all the parts of speech used in this sentence. (1 mark)**

*E.g. woman = noun*

We recognize that the problems that confront us will not be overcome immediately, so be patient.

We: \_\_\_\_\_

recognize: \_\_\_\_\_

that: \_\_\_\_\_

the: \_\_\_\_\_

problems: \_\_\_\_\_

that: \_\_\_\_\_

confront: \_\_\_\_\_

us: \_\_\_\_\_

will: \_\_\_\_\_

not: \_\_\_\_\_

be: \_\_\_\_\_

overcome: \_\_\_\_\_

immediately: \_\_\_\_\_

so: \_\_\_\_\_

be: \_\_\_\_\_

patient: \_\_\_\_\_

**VII. The following sentence is ambiguous. Paraphrase the sentence in 2 different ways OR draw tree diagrams to show the ambiguity involved. (1 mark)**

Visiting friends can be fun.

1. ....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2. ....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**VIII. What is the basic lexical relation between each pair of words listed here? (1 mark)**

1. tree – pine .....
2. stingy – mean .....
3. pale – pail .....
4. smart – stupid .....

**IX. What is one obvious presupposition of a speaker who says: (1 mark)**

1. Nobody thought it was that easy.  
.....
2. What did he say?  
.....
3. Tom's house is pretty.  
.....
4. What did they do when you arrived at their place?  
.....

**END OF TEST**