

## **Interactional language use in EFL classroom: Exploring the phenomena of mother tongue in Indonesia**

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**Abstract:** Basically, mother tongue can serve as a mediating part of language teaching and learning. However, a controversy whether the use of mother tongue in EFL classrooms should be avoided or allowed has not over yet. Therefore, the phenomena seem necessary to be more investigated in accordance with the needs and situation in Indonesian context. This phenomenological qualitative study was conducted in five different high schools in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. 5 teachers responded to semi structured interview and 10 students expressed their perception through focus group discussion. The findings demonstrated that teachers and students in Indonesia rely on the use of mother tongue, national (Indonesia) and local (e.g konjo, bugis) languages, to facilitate them in classroom interaction for achieving the success of foreign language acquisition. They feel that mother tongue is beneficial for overcoming cognitive difficulties, bridging communication gap, highlighting the important information, creating a more relaxing learning environment, saving energy and times, building social rapport, and forming students' positive attitude toward English. However, they have to minimize a high proportion use of mother tongue as it may counter-productive and encourages the low exposure in target language. The more students are exposed to the target language, the more successful they become.

**Keywords:** phenomenological qualitative, national and local languages, foreign language acquisition, target language.

### **Introduction**

English is a lingua franca of the world society today which serves as a tool for communication among people from different countries who speak different mother tongues. Thus, mastering English as a foreign language is something that becomes every state's demands that makes English is used as one of the compulsory subjects in curriculum at schools.

Therefore, to accelerate the development of English skills in Indonesia, various policies are made as Tsukamoto (2012, p.144) states the educational institutions have their own policy of how they want their English classes to be conducted and which language they want their classes taught in the students' mother tongue (Indonesia) or the teachers are expected to keep only the target language (English). However, some other educational institutions do not have specific policy and allow the classes to be taught by inserting the students' mother tongue or using English only as needed. The most important

thing is how teachers can use the power of teacher talk as well as possible for improving students' English skills and proficiency.

Krashen who supports the idea of using the English only at classroom interaction insists that the students' L1 should not be used in the classroom in order to maximize the exposure of the target language (1985, p. 14). Tsukamoto (2012, p.145) then further explains the former approach believes that avoiding the use of students' mother tongue will be effective and enhance the target language learning.

However, these opinions reap some critics from supporters of bilingual approach in some areas of EFL countries. There has been a longstanding debating the issue related to the interactional language use whether the use of mother tongue in EFL classes should be avoided or allowed (Khatai, 2011; Mahmoudi & Amirkhiz, 2011; Timor, 2012; Kayaoğlu, 2012; Tsukamoto, 2012; Mahmutoğlu & Kıcı, 2013; Karaağaç,

2014; Debreli & Oyman, 2015), and it seems not over yet.

Lo (2015, p.270) completely explains that teachers can use L1 appropriately to suit their students' needs in which they used a significant proportion of L1 at classroom to explain the subject content, interact with students and develop students' L2 metalinguistic awareness for students with limited L2 proficiency and in contrast, teachers used little first language only, mainly to provide translation equivalents for L2 subject-specific vocabulary items with students in a highly proficiency level of English. In addition, Khatai (2011, p.43) & Ma (2016, p.1) reinforce that the students' knowledge of their mother tongue is the greatest asset and rich source that they generally bring to the classroom to facilitate English language acquisition.

These two examples of different opinions motivate the researcher to deeply investigate the phenomena of mother tongue as the language choice in classroom interactional in accordance with the needs and situation in the context of Indonesia because, as Zacharias (2004, p.48) reports "the use of the students' mother tongue in teaching English, has not been largely addressed in Indonesia"

## Method

This research study applied a qualitative design of phenomenological. By conducting this method, the researcher first was turning to the nature of lived experience by tracing the EFL teaching and learning experience of students and teachers and then formulating the questions; second, investigating experience by interview in which the data would be noted, recorded and transcribed; next, categorizing the data step by step and pay attention on the essential themes; fourth, describing the phenomenon; and the last step, the researcher was interpreting the results and exploring the interactional language use in EFL classroom related to the phenomena whether or not mother tongue is necessary in Indonesian context, then taking a conclusion of what the lessons have been learned by conducting this research study

The researcher used the concept of purposeful sampling to choose the individuals and the site for studying. The subjects consisted of 5

teachers who were responded to the face to face semi-structured interview and 10 students were representative in focus group discussion. Both teachers and students were from five different high schools in diverse fields of study at South Sulawesi, Indonesia to find the varied responses. They were (1) Islamic Senior High School 2, (2) Islamic Boarding School of Babul Khaer, (3) Vocational High School Muhammadiyah, (4) Senior High School 7, and (5) Vocational High School 1.

The data were collected and gained through teachers' second language (English) and students' first language (Indonesia) in which the quotes were translated in English. Indeed, all the participants responded and answered all the questions asked in the interview but due to the time constraint, only salient and insightful responses were reported or they were reported in the form of summarizing and the conclusions of all responses.

## Finding and Discussion

The internalization of a foreign language acquisition centered in the classroom between teacher and the students and also interaction among students. Through interaction with the teacher, students can learn a lot, improve their language store and so, enlarge their knowledge of language as much as possible. Thus, in order to know the effectiveness of teaching and learning process in EFL class in Indonesian context, the interviews for teachers and FGD for students need to be conducted. The question was about teachers' perspectives on the use of mother tongue; whether they were in favor of using students' L1 or completely opposed to use it. The results showed that all teachers do not use English only when interacting in EFL classroom.

T<sub>3</sub>: [Actually, teacher struggled explaining the material in English. However, the classroom environment did not support the effort. We were afraid when imposing English use at class; it might be waste of time if we could not follow what was happening in class].

T<sub>4</sub>: [In my first year as an English teacher, I was in favor of using English only

when teaching because I thought that the best way to expose the target language that students could learn through listening to English from teacher. I am confident that I would never use mother tongue at classroom. However, I experienced after teaching some years and realizing the different proficiency levels of the students, I decided to use students' L1. I observed that did not pay attention when they didn't understand anything. Therefore, there is a very important change. I support the use of mother tongue and oppose target language use only]

The extract above explained that each teacher has his/ her own reason for this consideration. Teachers feel worry when imposing themselves to use 100% of English in the classroom because this will impact to the unsatisfactory learning objectives achievement. Besides, students always ask teacher to use mother tongue to make them understand well. In this situation, the important thing is teachers and students feel comfortable using mother tongue in their interaction.

Then, to know the type of skills taught that need the role of the mother tongue most, there are two answers only; grammar course (T1,T2,T3,T5) and reading course (T3,T4). All of the teachers were strict and discipline in the using of target language in speaking and listening courses because they believed that students should be exposed and maximized to the target language use as many studies (Khatai, 2011; Mahmoudi & Amirkhiz, 2011; Kayaoğlu, 2012; Voicu, 2012; Tsukamoto, 2012) show that target language must be used where possible and L1 when necessary because limited use of mother tongue is beneficial and over use of it may counter-productive as it encourages the low exposure in target language.

Two teachers suggested that reading course definitely requires the role of mother tongue to translate the new words directly as quoted from Khatai (2011) "mother tongue can be used to provide a quick and accurate translation of an English word that might take several minutes for

the teacher to explain". Besides, some teachers said that they found it useful to use the students' first language in order to explain grammatical concepts which were not present in the students' native language, such as the use of tenses. Overall, both teachers themselves and students wanted to be sure that the whole message could be transferred to the students properly.

To deep investigate the teachers' practice related to the proportions of the mother tongue they use, they were faced the question "How often code switching do you usually use between mother tongue and target language?".

The results showed that four teachers were less than 50% who insert the mother tongue in classroom interaction while one teacher still used more than 50%. They said that, actually the proportion of first language needs at EFL classroom could vary because they are really depends on the skill and level of the students. That is why exploring the students' needs and interests at the first meeting are very important.

For further exploring the usefulness of the mother tongue in EFL classroom interaction, the researcher continued the next question that can be seen in the following conversations:

*R:* [Beside for teaching grammar and reading course, in what situations does the mother tongue can be useful?]

*T<sub>1</sub>:* [Of course to make us closer with students. Then, it will be easier to motivate them, decrease students' anxiety, and make them feel comfortable in learning English. At class, I do not only use Indonesian but also local language if making a joke and ice breaking when the classes seem to be serious.]

*T<sub>5</sub>:* [I use mother tongue for some purposes such as explaining the contents of the material, providing important information especially when providing suggestions the way to learn English. All of them I do to build motivation and building rapport with students]

The above extract shows that mother tongue is not only useful for overcoming cognitive difficulties such as grammar and reading text, but also useful for affective purposes which will impact to the students' psychomotor. And the most interesting thing was mother tongue used by EFL teachers in classroom interaction is not only the national language (Indonesia) but also local language (e.g. Konjo and Bugis), especially when making a joke. This approach was employed to encourage and motivate students whose English language proficiency is rather weak.

Then, in order to know the students' responses and expectations related to the use of mother tongue in EFL classroom interaction, the students in FGD were faced the questions:

R : [Do you feel that teacher needs to use mother tongue at class?]

Ss: [Yes of course](all students answer simultaneously)

R : [If yes, when do you feel you need it? Mention as many as possible"]!.

The various answers emerged from the participants in responding those questions. They stated that asking something which is less understood will be more satisfying if using Indonesian language because the problem will be more clearly conveyed. This answer means mother tongue is needed by students especially for the lower level of proficiency who do not have a basic of target language and the majority of the students believe that using L1 in their English classroom interaction can positively contribute to their L2 learning.

Then, in order to know more students' feeling if teachers use target language only in their instruction, they were faced to the next question of "what do you think if teachers use English only at class when teaching?".

All of the participants were disagree when teachers use English only at class. One of the students said "English is a compulsory subject at school so whether agree or not, all students must learn it. The problem is I do not have enough vocabularies yet, if my teacher uses 100% of English at class, I might sit in silence for hours and hours without uttering any sentence or even

words". The other students support the statement with various arguments.

This study highlight that using English only in EFL classrooms can precisely lead to some problems because there would be no guarantee that teachers' instructions and explanations are comprehended well. Besides, many students feel high degree of anxiety about totally getting lost, confused, misinterpreting and miscommunication of what their teachers say.

The last question was aimed to investigate whether or not the teachers have used the frequency of mother tongue in accordance with the proportions of students' needs. For this question, the researcher did not find an analogous answer. Some students responded that it has accordance with the students' need, and others responded that the proportion of mother tongue used by teacher is not enough yet. From the answers it can be concluded that participants do not have the same degree of English proficiency even they are at the same level of school. Hence, it will be re-emphasized that the need of proportion of the mother tongue use in EFL class depends on the skill and level of students' proficiency.

The result of the interviewed and focus group discussion showed that both teachers and students have the positive response to the use of mother tongue in EFL classroom interaction as Mahmutoğlu&Kıcıır (2013, p.49) quote "the mother tongue is a mediating part of language teaching and learning".

## Conclusion and Suggestion

The controversy over whether or not the students' mother tongue could be used in EFL classrooms is ongoing in some EFL countries. This debate exists between the supporters of monolingual approach who oppose the use of students' L1 and bilingual approach who welcome the students' L1 in classroom. Basically, the debating aimed at finding out the best way to facilitate students in their foreign language acquisition.

In the context of Indonesia in which most of the population is indigenous citizens who speak a common national language, the advantages of using the mother tongue cannot be disregarded.

Despite of the teachers' willingness to use it as little as possible, mother tongue always presents in the classroom interaction, whether consciously or not.

This study demonstrates teachers and students need mother tongue to negotiate meaning to reach successful learning. Teachers often use national language (Indonesia) when explaining grammar, the content of reading text and providing motivation for students, whereas local languages (e.g. Konjo and Bugis) are mostly used for telling the jokes.

Some other advantages of using mother tongue found in this study were beneficial for bridging communication gap, Overcoming cognitive difficulties, highlighting the important information, creating a more relaxing learning environment, saving energy and times, building social relationship, and forming students' positive character. However, the most important thing that, teachers have to minimize the use of mother tongue and keep to maximize the target language because the more students are exposed to the target language, the more successful they become.

These findings can be useful for language education policy-makers who support monolingual approach to re-examine the use of English-only and provide the opportunities to the use of mother tongue judiciously and principally. Even though curriculum guidelines seemed to affect interactional language use at EFL classroom, however teachers and students themselves are best placed to determine based on the immediate context of the classroom, the degree and the basic use of the target language and the L1 because the role of mother tongue also depends on the teaching methods, teacher beliefs and the level of students' proficiency.

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