Codeswitching as a bridging strategy for the learning of English as a foreign language

Alternancia Lingüística como Estrategia de Acoplamiento para el Aprendizaje del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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ABSTRACT

This ongoing study delves into the effects of using the native language (L1), specifically Spanish, on the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in different academic environments. These include adult learners at UNAD and secondary school students in Colombia. This research examines students' perspectives on the incorporation of L1 in English lessons and its impact on their learning outcomes. Through surveys, on-site observations, and performance evaluations, the research explores how the strategic integration of L1 through codeswitching influences English acquisition. The initial findings, reached through all the previously mentioned data and analysis tools, indicate that thoughtful incorporation of L1 in EFL classes lowers the emotional barriers and fosters the growth of linguistic awareness, potentially boosting students' proficiency levels.

KEYWORDS:

learning, teaching methods, mother tongue, language instruction.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación en curso investiga el impacto de usar la lengua materna (L1), específicamente español, en el proceso de aprendizaje del inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) en diversos contextos educativos, que involucra a estudiantes adultos de la UNAD y estudiantes de secundaria en Colombia. Este estudio examina las percepciones de los estudiantes al usar L1 en sus clases de inglés y su influencia en los resultados de aprendizaje obtenidos. A través de entrevistas, observaciones in-situ y evaluaciones de desempeño, la investigación explora cómo el uso estratégico de L1 a través de la alternancia lingüística afecta la adquisición del inglés. Los resultados preliminares sugieren que un uso razonable de la L1 en las clases de EFL reduce el filtro afectivo y promueve el desarrollo de la consciencia lingüística, lo que potencialmente mejoraría las competencias de los estudiantes.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

aprendizaje, método de enseñanza, lengua materna, enseñanza de idiomas.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the mother tongue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is a topic of ongoing debate, with varying views on its impact. As a pedagogical approach, translanguaging or codeswitching is the practice of moving fluidly between different languages in a classroom with the aim of providing a dynamic environment for

language acquisition and training. This study explores the use of the native language, Spanish, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Its objective is to discover how the incorporation of Spanish influences in EFL learning at UNAD online and in face-to-face classes in secondary school. The research also aims to identify common situations in which students use their first language in class, regardless of the teaching method. While traditional thinking suggests that the use of the mother tongue hinders learning, recent studies and practical experience highlight its advantages, especially in explaining cultural ideas and sayings. However, the ideal balance of first language integration remains uncertain, impacted by students' backgrounds, learning needs, and age. This study seeks to shed light on the role of the mother tongue in EFL education, proposing that purposeful use of the native language can improve students' language skills by breaking down emotional barriers and promoting linguistic awareness, ultimately improving their proficiency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature Review

Theories play a vital role in understanding the learning process of foreign or second language. Despite its outdated nature, the grammatical-translation method remains a prominent approach in EFL education. This method focuses on memorizing grammar rules through direct and inverse text translations, prioritizing reading and writing over verbal communication. It also stresses the memorization of new vocabulary, with a narrow focus on sentence structure. The method persists due to the belief that it ensures complete language acquisition, leading teachers to avoid L1 in L2 classes so as not to exercises and memorization.

Martín (2000) stresses the importance of the linguistic background of both students and teachers in any second language classroom. The degree to which they share the same L1 can influence the relationship between them with a shared L1 serving as a bridge that makes students feel more comfortable and facilitates communication when they struggle to find the right words in the target language.

Additionally, the socio-cognitive approach in language teaching highlights the relevance of social interaction in language learning. Karaka-Claire et al. (2023) stresses the need for authentic social interaction to provide understandable input and exposure to real-life language contexts beyond the classroom. This approach is crucial in EFL settings where learners require exposure to genuine English and interaction with native speakers for full language immersion.

Furthermore, the process of language acquisition is influenced by learners' internal linguistic knowledge system. Depending on their L1, learners' perception of the L2 they are trying to learn may be facilitated or hindered. As learners progress, they begin to understand the functional properties of the target language and how sentences are used in different contexts, bridging the gap between lexical structures and meanings. In these early stages, L1 can be helpful in bridging elements between the target language and the mother tongue.

Krashen's affective filter theory postulates that negative emotions such as lack of motivation, low self-confidence, and anxiety can create a barrier to language acquisition. Creating a low-anxiety environment is crucial to reduce the affective filter and allowing input to be processed effectively. Effective teachers are those who can make input comprehensible to non-native speakers, focusing on communication rather than grammatical

structure, and providing sufficient input to facilitate language acquisition.

Gaining implicit/unconscious and explicit/conscious knowledge are also essential aspects of language acquisition. Implicit knowledge is intuitive and tacit, fundamental to developing communicative competence, while explicit knowledge is conscious and intentional, requiring attention and awareness. EFL teaching can benefit from encouraging students to rely on their intuitive understanding and realize they may already know more than they think they do.

Finally, several variables influence the teaching and learning of L2, including L1 proficiency, willingness to work hard, and the use of metacognitive strategies. Age has not been found to be a determining factor in learning a second or foreign language, highlighting the importance of individual efforts in the language learning process.

Previous Studies

First, Cantero (2007) conducted outstanding research whose main objective was to prove the importance of the interaction between L1 and L2 when trying to integrate language contents in ESO bilingual classes in Spain. The author also intended to emphasise how knowledge of linguistic skills in their mother tongue can guide students in the process of learning a foreign language. The methodology used was carried out through a bilingual teaching system in which students learned topics of different subjects in English. Four subjects were selected: mathematics, social sciences, music, and physical education. The groups that were receive their instruction in English were chosen, while other groups that were to receive the same instruction but in their L1 were set aside, continuing with their traditional system. Bilingual 1st and 2nd year

ESO students showed a more complete and deeper understanding, assimilation, and internalisation of the concepts explained in the foreign language than their peers in the traditional groups. Cantero (2007) stated that the proper application of the elementary principles of the "integrated curriculum" in the bilingual setting depends on teachers' ability to make students feel attracted and motivated by a teaching-learning model different from the usual one (p. 59).

Jill Fortune, who was the Language Department Coordinator at Universidad Externado de Colombia in 2012, produced a very important paper addressing the use of L1 in EFL contexts. Her objectives were to analyse current perceptions and practices in terms of L1 use among teachers and students in EFL and ESL settings. In her methodology, students and teachers were surveyed in order to determine perceptions and usual practices; they were enquired about their proficiency in English and their vernacular language and about the use of their local L1 in class. To this end, a stratified random sample was taken among students and teachers. Additionally, in order to maintain specific relevance to the home university demographics, factors such as age and degree programme were controlled by studying higher education courses that included mixed-school groups. Findings confirmed that L1 use can be beneficial to EFL learners, particularly at the lower levels of language acquisition, although teachers may need to review their reasons for using L1 as well as their repertoire of pro-L2 use strategies (Fortune, 2012).

Agudelo et al. (2017) carried out a thorough selection of the available updated information on the use of Spanish as a mother tongue in English learning in Colombia. Their objective was to characterise the influence of the mother tongue (MT) in the learning of a foreign language (English, in this particular context)

and to identify factors that influence this process based on national and international sources of information. Their methodology was carried out in the period between 2015 and 2016 in Bogota and was derived from a bibliographic review process; different databases such as Ebsco, Scielo, and Redalyc were reviewed, as well as some indexed journals. Documents valid between 2000 and 2015 were considered relevant for the information selection criteria. According to the authors, their results showed that "interlanguage is a phenomenon that occurs in the process of learning a second language, where linguistic transfer and interference are evident and the lexical transfer that the learner performs unconsciously" and "it is evident that there are factors that directly influence the foreign language learning process, such as age, social context, motivation, personality, and the teaching method" (Agudelo et al., 2017, p. 30).

In order to objectively examine the language development of young second -language learners in their social environments, Saneka & Witt (2019) conducted a study at an early childcare institution in South Africa. A qualitative praxeological framework was used as the methodology; parent partnership in mother tongue maintenance was sought and explored in focus group interviews, using an action-reflection cycle to understand the dilemma of young second language learners in South Africa. Ways of overcoming language barriers using the child's competencies were explored through persona dolls. These methods contributed to the development of sustained and shared thinking among children, their parents, and the researchers. Their results showed that young children found their own means of engaging in meaning-making processes both at home and at school. The issue of linguicism was addressed by encouraging parental involvement in preserving their

mother tongue while their children learned English as a second language. The authors concluded that "as long as English means access to improved economic opportunities, there will be a bias against those whose home language is not English; the dilemma of the young English language learners remains an issue of equity, access, and redness for past injustices" (Saneka & Witt, 2019, p. 7).

Lastly, Perfecto (2020) conducted descriptive research on bridging strategies used by English teachers in the Philippines. The study revealed that teachers used translanguaging strategies like direct translation and codeswitching to enhance student engagement in language learning activities. These strategies allowed for more efficient teaching and active student participation. According to the author, "these strategies used the various linguistic and semiotic resources of both students and teachers as mediating tools to allow more efficient teaching and learning and more active participation from students in the language learning activities" (Perfecto, 2020, p. 23).

METHODOLOGY

In this ongoing qualitative research, a methodology based on on-site observation, action research, interviews, and evaluations was implemented. For the first stage of the methodology, the focus was on adult learners in a virtual environment at UNAD. This first stage was developed over two different semesters. In the first semester, students from the Online Language Community (OLC) were observed. In the second semester, the focus shifted to students from the 518020 Pedagogical Practice in Online Environments practicum scenario. In both terms, students shared some common traits, such as ages between 18 and 40 years old, locations throughout the national territory, and English

proficiency levels between A2 and B2, with few exceptions. The process aimed to identify students' perceptions regarding the use of L1 in their class and analyse how the use of the mother tongue affects students' acquisition processes through regular evaluations and monitoring.

Among OLC and 518020 Pedagogical Practice in Online Environments, I had eight groups under my care that I studied. In order to gather information and perceptions, I designed a survey (see Figure 1) to be answered in 5 minutes in order to avoid overwhelming students while being assertive enough to identify the occasions where L1 was used in their classes. Additionally, I created six field journals to record in detail the observations made and situations experienced within the virtual classroom. My observations started from the first class with every group; all classes were recorded, and a complete follow-up of the events was written down in the six field journals. The usage of L1 was consciously controlled, I did not allow more than 20% of Spanish in class. Interviews were conducted throughout the term with all the students who attended, and their answers were collected through Google Forms. In addition, a debate on whether the use of L1 is convenient or detrimental in EFL classes was promoted with all students to gather their experiences and perceptions. I continued observing and interviewing my students until the end of the term.

The second stage, involving high school students, is pending completion. The tools for data collection in this stage will include surveys, oral interviews, field journals, and evaluations to assess students' progress. The methodology will be similar to the first stage. I will record the classes and save my on-site observations in journal fields. My main objective will be to analyse how the use of the mother tongue could decrease their affective

Figure 1. Interview Format applied to OLC students.

Note: Interview format followed in methodology.
Source: Author

filter and improve their acquisition process. I intend to continue the observations, surveys, and interviews until the end of the term.
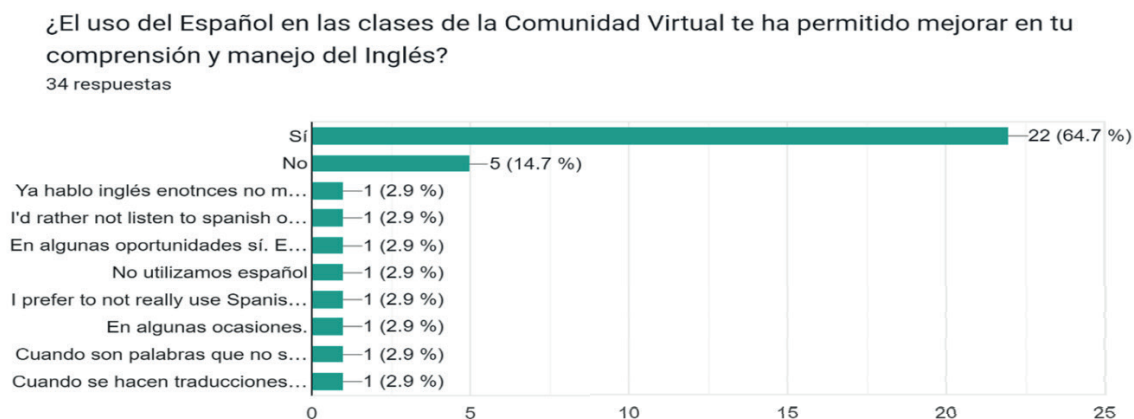
PRELIMINARY RESULTS

For the first term, 34 students completed the main survey; each class had a maximum of 5 students, with occasional single-student attendance. Despite students coming from different Colombian zones, no significant pattern related to the L1's influence was found. Alternatively, when L1 was used in their English classes within the Online Language Community (OLC), students predominantly chose options such as explaining vocabulary and meanings (79.4%) and giving instructions (52.9%). Even at advanced levels such as C1, there was a clear pattern of the use of Spanish in English classes within the OLC. Other uses of L1 included general talking, accommodating low-level students, and when recordings were paused. Only two students (5.9%) declared they had never used their mother tongue in classes.

As shown in Figure 2, the majority (64.7%) acknowledged that the use of Spanish helped them improve their comprehension and understanding of English. Interestingly, students with a very advanced proficiency level (C2) preferred not to use their mother tongue in classes. However, most students considered the use of Spanish in small amounts to be beneficial and useful.

Figure 2. L1 Influence perceived

¿El uso del Español en las clases de la Comunidad Virtual te ha permitido mejorar en tu comprensión y manejo del Inglés?
34 respuestas

Sí	22 (64.7 %)
No	5 (14.7 %)
Ya hablo inglés enotnces no m…	1 (2.9 %)
I'd rather not listen to spanish o…	1 (2.9 %)
En algunas oportunidades sí. E…	1 (2.9 %)
No utilizamos español	1 (2.9 %)
I prefer to not really use Spanis…	1 (2.9 %)
En algunas ocasiones.	1 (2.9 %)
Cuando son palabras que no s…	1 (2.9 %)
Cuando se hacen traducciones…	1 (2.9 %)

Note: Students' perception about the L1 influence in their EFL classes.
Source: Author

more advanced a student's level of proficiency of English, the more likely he or she is to view the use of their native language with fear. On-site observation indicated that students turn to their native language when they believe their vocabulary is insufficient or their English grammar is weak, either for meaning-giving or for communicating ideas they wish to convey.

A clear pattern emerged from the surveys, class observations, and teaching journals, suggesting that Spanish was used to explain meanings or new vocabulary and to give instructions. Additionally, most students (76.5%) mentioned that the use of their mother tongue improved their L2 comprehension and proficiency. These findings indicate that the use of L1 is a reality even in C1 classes and advanced-level settings, used by both teachers and students for various purposes, such as sharing meanings and giving instructions.

During the following semester, students showed great interest in learning and engagement, valuing the nurturing learning environment, the freedom to make errors, and the opportunity to resort to their native language when necessary as the field journals showed. Initially, some advanced students were reluctant to use their mother tongue in class, fearing that it might impede their progress. However, they eventually encountered difficulties articulating their thoughts in L2, which made the use of L1 necessary to bridge those gaps as the recorded classes demonstrate. As interviews demonstrated, students expressed satisfaction with these classes, considering them among the most beneficial they had experienced, as they were able to actively analyse the foreign language, feel secure in making mistakes, grasp concepts more effectively by practicing all elements immediately after learning them, and discern

the distinctions between their native language and the acquired foreign language.

These findings suggest that the use of L1 can serve as a tool to aid students learning by improving their semantic comprehension and self-confidence. However, further research is needed to study L1 use across all English levels and age groups comprehensively.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The use of Spanish as a mother tongue is widely demonstrated through surveys, class observations, recordings, and field journals as an important tool for explaining vocabulary, giving clear instructions, making up for deficiencies, and for metalinguistic comparison. Moreover, the majority of students stated that the use of L1 positively influenced their acquisition process by helping them decrease their affective filter and providing them with a safety net for mistakes.

Additionally, findings suggest that students, even those at advanced proficiency levels, benefit from the judicious use of L1 in the classroom. It bridges languages, aids the comprehension of complex concepts, and promotes a more relaxed and confident learning environment.

Future research will focus on secondary students and the role of their first language in the process of learning English, considering their unique learning preferences, obstacles, and approaches. By examining diverse groups with varying levels of mother tongue use, other researchers can further analyse how using the first language may influence English proficiency and performance.

These preliminary conclusions highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing

students' linguistic diversity in the language learning process, recognizing that the use of the mother tongue can be a valuable asset in second language acquisition.

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