
Attitudes of adult Chinese-background learners and an ESL teacher towards L1 Use in an AMEP class in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Teaching beginner English learners is always a great challenge for teachers due to communication difficulties with learners. In Australia, bilingual teachers or bilingual assistants are available in some Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) classes to provide first language support for beginner learners. This paper reports on a study which investigated the attitudes towards L1 use of a Chinese-English bilingual teacher and his six beginner learners in an AMEP class in Sydney. Data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews with the teacher and six learners. The findings indicate that L1 use was highly valued by both the teacher and learners. Learners showed a strong preference for using L1 because of its pedagogical and cognitive benefits. While the teacher recognized the important role L1 in giving explanation, he also expressed concern about students' over-reliance on L1 use. The paper concludes with practical implications for English language teaching, program management and classroom language use in adult migrants English learning settings; and provides some suggestions for future research.

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University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 4, 57-84.

©2009 ISSN: 1834-3198 (Print) & 1834-4712 (Online)

INTRODUCTION

It is always a great challenge to teach beginner language learners because it is difficult to make them understand all the instructions in class, follow the lessons closely, complete language tasks successfully or communicate effectively in the target language in classroom interactions. From the learner perspectives, they need some assistance in asking questions in lessons, participating actively in discussions and expressing their thoughts freely. It is particularly difficult with adult beginner learners since they may need to express more complex thoughts than younger learners. Sharing the same home language with learners, a teacher can explain difficult vocabulary items and grammar structures by giving an equivalent in the learners' L1 while learners may ask questions and communicate with the teacher in their first language if their attempts to communicate in the target language are unsuccessful. However, the use of learners' L1 in learning a second language (L2) is a controversial issue in language learning pedagogy as there are advantages and disadvantages in its use.

In some ESL learning contexts, the use of L1 instruction in L2 learning has long been a controversial issue in the academic debate on bilingual education. 'Bilingual education' refers to programs that use an immigrant child's native language as a medium of instruction while s/he is learning the majority language at school (e.g., Pifer, 1979 as cited in Grosjean, 1982). Opponents of bilingual programs argue that limited English proficiency learners are being denied access to English as a result of being instructed for part of the day through their L1 whereas the advocates of bilingual education argue that L1 instruction is necessary to ensure that learners understand the academic input they are exposed to and the L1 provides a foundation for the development of English (Cummins, 2000). Cummins (1978, 1979) formulated the 'developmental interdependence' hypothesis and the 'threshold' hypothesis which suggest that adequately developed L1 skills form the basis of the achievement of a cognitively and academically beneficial type of bilingualism. The

'developmental interdependence' hypothesis proposes that the development of L2 competence is partially a function of the type of L1 competence a bilingual child has already developed prior to intensive L2 exposure. The 'threshold' hypothesis suggests that there may be threshold levels of linguistic competence a bilingual child must attain in order to gain the positive cognitive impacts of bilingualism. Apart from the debate of L1 use for children second language learners, it is inconclusive whether it is desirable to use L1 in L2 learning and the arguments against and for using the L1 are discussed below.

Reasons against L1 use

There are pedagogical, practical and socio-linguistic reasons for minimizing the use of the L1 in learning L2. The reasons against L1 use include important pedagogical goals in an L2 classroom to maximize learners' opportunities to produce L2 output (Schweers, 1999) and to achieve communicative competence in the target language. The avoidance of L1 use was attributed to the dominance of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has been a prevalent language teaching methodology in English language teaching (ELT) in the last two decades. As a result, the usefulness and value of the L1 has not been thoroughly investigated and discussed. The insistence that teachers use 'English-only' in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms was a reaction to earlier methodologies such as grammar translation.

In addition, there are practical considerations in discouraging L1 use. Immigrants in Australia and some other countries, such as the United States and Canada, are from widely diverse linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds. Learners are usually allocated to different classes according to their proficiency level rather than their linguistic backgrounds. In a multilingual class, it is discriminatory to use some learners' L1 to the disadvantage of other learners whose L1 is not used (Fodor & Thevenaz, 2005). The final reason is that minimising L1 use is related to the concept of linguistic imperialism, i.e. the

'political' dominance of English (Phillipson, 1992). English is such a powerful language used worldwide that its native speakers can gain the advantage of teaching English in any part of the world without having to learn the learners' home language (Cook, 2001; Murray & Wigglesworth, 2005). Consequently, a large number of English teachers may be monolingual and do not have sufficient knowledge of learner's L1 to be able to use it in teaching. These three reasons may have explained why the role of the L1 had not been valued.

Reasons for L1 use

Various empirical studies have shown that the L1 is a valuable and beneficial resource in classrooms and can facilitate L2 learning (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Chau, 2001; Nation, 2003; Murray & Wigglesworth, 2005; Schweers, 1999; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Pedagogically, the L1 may be a cognitive bridge to the L2 which helps learners to analyse language and work at a more demanding level than using L2 only (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) suggests that the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) is the level of potential development in learning. At this level, there is a difference between what a learner can accomplish when acting alone and what the same learner can achieve when being assisted by an expert (for example, an adult in L1 acquisition and a teacher in L2 learning). The ZPD is closely related to the concept of 'scaffolding', which is the assistance given to a learner that guides the learner to accomplish an activity which is initially too complex for him or her to attempt alone (Bruner, 1983). By using the L1, a teacher provides 'scaffolding' for L2 learners, which may enable them to produce the teacher's expected linguistic output in L2 and participate in classroom activities and interactions. Also, learners can use the L1 to ask for explanations if they cannot understand (Wigglesworth, 2003) and there has been evidence showing that some learners achieve more rapid progress in a bilingual program (Auerbach, 1993).

Learners' L1 may also function as a psychological tool (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). It creates a 'social and cognitive' space in which learners can help each other (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). L1 may also provide a sense of security (Auerbach, 1993; Chan, 2000; Cole, 1998; O'Grady, 1987; Shamash, 1990; Wigglesworth, 2003) and enable learners to build their self-esteem (Murray & Wigglesworth, 2005). L1 use does not benefit only learners but also teachers as Wigglesworth (2003) found that the presence of a bilingual teacher or a bilingual assistant reduced the frustration of both teachers and learners.

Finally, L1 use is of practical advantage because it attracts drop-outs to re-enroll in bilingual programs. Some learners avoid enrolling in any English program because of their low language proficiency and their inability to follow the lessons. However, some drop-outs re-enroll when they realise that bilingual classes are available (Auerbach, 1993; Wigglesworth, 2003). Another practical advantage of L1 use is the efficient use of class time, which is the most frequent justification teachers give for using the L1 (Harbord, 1992). Valuable class time can be saved for more productive activities rather than for lengthy explanations of vocabulary and grammar in the target language which may still leave learners confused.

RESEARCH ON ATTITUDES TO L1 LANGUAGE USE

Previous studies that examined the role of the L1 in second language acquisition focused mainly on the amount and the reasons for using the L1 (Duff & Polio, 1990; Macaro, 2001; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003), and the attitudes towards using it in university foreign language learning settings (Levine, 2003; Varshney & Rolin-Ianziti 2006), in ESL or EFL settings (Muir, 2001; Schweers, 1999, Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) and in adult migrant settings (Chau, 2001; Murray & Wigglesworth, 2005; O'Grady, 1987; Wigglesworth, 2003). Turnbull and Arnett (2002) provided a comprehensive review of the theoretical perspectives and empirical studies of teacher uses of the L1 and L2 in second and foreign language learning settings.

Inconsistency marks the studies to date which have investigated the attitudes towards L1 use. Some studies found that learners adopted positive attitudes (Muir, 2001; Schweers, 1999) while others did not. Varshney and Rolin-Ianziti (2006) found that some university students who learned a foreign language saw the L1 as helpful in clarification, comprehension and developing a sense of community between peers and teachers but others were concerned about the disappearance of challenges and motivation. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) also found that the minimal L1 use by some university ESL students was related to how they felt towards using it in L2 activities. Some students were reluctant to use it whereas others thought it helped them understand graphic prompts more easily and allowed efficient completion of tasks.

Apart from inconsistent results reported, the issue of attitude towards using the L1 in adult migrant contexts is an important research area which has been under-researched. Bilingual support is now available in different modes in the AMEP (Chau, 2001). In some cases, a bilingual teacher is available with a group of students whereas in other cases, one or more bilingual assistants offer help to students with a monolingual teacher. Yet, only a few studies have been conducted to evaluate this bilingual teaching approach. If this approach is found to be valuable and important for assisting migrants to learn English, more bilingual support may be provided for these learners. O'Grady (1987) investigated both the teacher and the learner attitudes towards the use of L1 in adult migrant classes. While a majority of learners, bilingual assistants, teachers and administrators favoured the use of the L1, some teachers felt that using the L1 was undesirable because of learners' over dependency on bilingual teachers and their reluctance to move to a mainstream class. Some learners were also concerned about the interference of L1 and the reduction of exposure to English. These findings were valuable but more updated data is needed because the study was conducted about twenty years ago when bilingual assistance was not systematically available and not many teachers and learners had the actual experiences of learning and teaching in a class with bilingual

support. With more bilingual support currently available, more teachers and learners have the opportunities to experience using L1 to support English and such experience may have caused changes in attitudes. Therefore, the present study will provide more up-to-date information regarding the attitudes of teacher and learners towards L1 use and provide implications for effective teaching and program evaluation.

While evaluating the Bilingual Assistant Program for adult migrants, Chau (2001) investigated the attitudes of teachers and learners towards L1 use and found that monolingual English teachers observed greater participation and more effective learning in the bilingual sessions. However, primary data were not collected directly from learners on their attitudes. Through the data gathered by bilingual assistants, it was found that learners considered the bilingual sessions helpful and productive. In the present study, data were collected directly from learners through individual interviews and therefore learner views could be thoroughly examined.

Based also on teachers' self-report, another recent study (Murray & Wigglesworth, 2005) examined L1 use and evaluated the role of L1 in adult migrant classrooms from teacher perspectives. The study was conducted in the AMEP in Sydney and Melbourne, involving 20 teachers and bilingual assistants. The results showed that L1 use helped teachers with explanations and assisted learners in improving understanding and participation. Based on the teacher perceptions of the learner response to the L1 use, it was found that learners were generally positive towards using L1 and recognized its pedagogical and psychological benefits. This was a comprehensive and significant study but the data were collected from teachers and bilingual assistants only. The present study which collected interview data directly from learners may add a different perspective by representing the views of learner, which may be very different from the perceptions of teachers.

The aim of the study was to investigate the following research questions:

1. Do learners prefer to study in a bilingual class? What reasons do the learners give for their preferences?
2. How important is studying in a bilingual class for the learners?
3. What attitudes does a bilingual teacher adopt towards the use of learners' L1 in teaching English?

THE STUDY

Setting

The study was conducted in a pre-CSWE (Course in Spoken and Written English)¹ class in one of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)² centres in Sydney with six Chinese adult migrant English learners and their Chinese-English bilingual teacher. AMEP centres, which provides English learning opportunities to migrants in Australia, are funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Migrants who have been assessed not having the English language proficiency are entitled 510 hours of free English instruction. It is highly possible that learners are placed in multilingual classes because of the divergent linguistic backgrounds of the migrants³. However, in the research site, two bilingual classes were offered at the moment of the data collection and this pre-CSWE class was chosen because the teacher expressed interest in this study.

¹ Pre-CSWE is the first level of a four-level competency-based curriculum framework used nationwide in the AMEP.

² The term 'migrants' in Australia means 'immigrants', which is a term more commonly used in North America and Europe. In this paper the term 'immigrants' is used except when referring to the AMEP.

³ In year 2002, learners at the AMEP were from 142 different language backgrounds.

The class consisted of 17 learners (five Cantonese and twelve Mandarin speakers), with 14 female and just three male learners. The ages of learner ranged from 40 to over 70, with most learners in their 60's or 70's. The class met on Saturdays from four hours and the lesson usually started with a one-hour independent learning session in the computer laboratory. It was then followed by a regular lesson where learners sat in groups but teacher-fronted teaching was dominant. Learners were exceptionally keen and enthusiastic, had good relationships with each other and assisted one another in learning. However, most of them were not very confident learners as they often emphasised their forgetfulness during the lessons.

Student participants

Student participants were six learners (one male and five females), aged from 40 to 65. They were randomly selected from the list given by the teacher and represented three proficiency levels: low, average and high, with two learners from each level to take part in the interview. An equal distribution of gender in each proficiency level was not achieved because no male learners were listed in the 'average' and 'high' levels. There were proportionally more Cantonese participants as learners were randomly selected. However, these six participants could be seen as a representative sample of the class in terms of their education level. They had lived in Australia from six months to six and a half years. Two of them had learned English for less than 50 hours while the other four had learned for about 100 hours. Table 1 presents the profile of each participant in detail. To let the participants remain anonymous, pseudonyms were used.

Teacher participant

The teacher participant was a male teacher in his early 40's who spoke Mandarin as his first language and some Cantonese. He had taught English in China for nine years before migrating to Australia. After obtaining a postgraduate diploma in TESOL, he started teaching English to migrants for ten years. Besides teaching in the centre of the present study, he also taught evening classes at various

levels in two other AMEP centres. He was a friendly and approachable teacher who always added in some humour in his lessons to create a relaxing learning atmosphere for learners.

TABLE 1
Participant profile

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| Name | King Ying | Lai Yee | Su Xian | Mei Kuen | Mo Ying | Mei Ha |
| Gender | Male | Female | Female | Female | Female | Female |
| English level in class | Low | Low | Average | Average | High | High |
| First language | Cantonese | Cantonese | Mandarin | Cantonese | Mandarin | Cantonese |
| Education level | Junior high school | / | Primary | Primary | High school | Primary |
| Length of study in Australia | 6 months | Less than 2 years | 6 and a half years | 4 years | 4 years | 1 year |
| Hours of studying English | 90 hours | 100 hours | 40 hours | 120 hours | 32 hours | 120 hours |
| Reasons for learning English | Communication with grandchildren | Understanding daily conversation | Communication with others more easily | Communication with others in the society | Finding a better job | Having the language for daily activities |

Data Collection

Participants were contacted through the manager of the AMEP centre, who sent an email to teachers for an expression of interest. The researcher then contacted the interested teacher and explained the research aims to all the learner participants. All the participants realised that they participated in the study voluntarily and consent forms were signed. Each individual semi-structured interview was audio-recorded, lasted from about 15 minutes to 30 minutes, and was conducted in either Mandarin or Cantonese for learners and English for the teacher.

Conducting interviews as a research method in this study facilitated data collection. Since learners in this class were not highly literate, filling in a questionnaire could be an overwhelming task and was considered inappropriate. Individual interviews were selected so that participants could express their own views without being affected by others. Nine questions were prepared to keep the

discussion topics in focus but also allowed scope for expansion (See Appendix A).

The participants were not informed of the questions in advance so as to obtain spontaneous responses. The researcher memorised all the questions in order to maintain a natural conversational tone and put the participants at ease. Learner interviews were conducted during the independent learning session while the teacher interviews were conducted in two sessions: the first session on the background information of the class and the second one on the teacher attitudes towards L1 use. The focused questions of the teacher interviews were shown in Appendix B.

Apart from interviews, classroom observations of three lessons were arranged which helped the researcher understand the English levels of this group of learners, their classroom learning experiences, and how L1 was actually used in the lessons.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and translated by the researcher. To ensure accuracy in translation, back translation was performed. The interview transcripts were analysed through content analysis, using categorical strategies to break down the data. Themes and sub-themes were identified and coded. No priori categories were used and this allowed categories to emerge from the data. To establish the accuracy and consistency of coding, a sample of transcripts was coded independently by a research assistant, using the coding frame suggested by the researcher. Disagreement was discussed in the coder meeting and the inter-coder agreement coefficient reached 77.7%. In this study, frequency counts and quotes from the participants will be used to support the analysis.

FINDINGS

Answers relevant to Research question 1

Learner attitudes towards bilingual classes

The learner interviews focused on collecting background information from the participants and their views of using L1 to learn English. To answer the first research question of learner attitudes towards bilingual classes, participants were asked whether they preferred a bilingual or mainstream class. The interview data revealed that participants unanimously preferred studying in a bilingual class and this implied their positive attitude towards using L1. The following excerpts illustrate this:

I like this class very much. Using both languages is a must. (Lai Yee)

Yes, I like this class. A bilingual class is a must for me. (Mo Ying)

Yes, a bilingual class is a bit better for me. (King Ying)

I like a bilingual class very much. (Su Xian)

Reasons why learners prefer bilingual classes

To investigate why learners preferred to study in a bilingual class, participants were asked to explain the reasons of their preferences. The following four reasons were given for learner preferences for bilingual classes in the interview data. When analysing the reasons provided, it was found that they were mainly of pedagogical and cognitive factors.

Learners' own English level and age

King Ying, Su Xian and Mo Ying reported that they all preferred to study in a bilingual class and mainly because of their beginner level of English. This is shown in the excerpts below:

A bilingual class is better because my English standard is low and I don't know the basics. (King Ying)

I like this class because my English level is low. I can understand some simple words but don't know how to pronounce a whole sentence. (Su Xian)

I like this [class] very much and I like the teacher, Mr Chen. As I don't know the basics in English, using both languages is a must. The teacher explains things in Mandarin and I can understand the meaning. (Mo Ying)

Mei Ha also mentioned that her preference for a bilingual class was due to her old age.

I'm old. We can't cope in an English-only class. I don't know what other classmates think. For me, I think I'm old and it's difficult to learn a new language. Unlike youngsters, when you teach them something, they can remember everything. (Mei Ha)

It appeared that learners realised the limitations in their English proficiency and their learning ability that using L1 could help them to learn the basics in English, be able to build from a solid foundation and proceed to the mainstream classes at a later stage. Using L1 enabled them to follow the lessons and cope with their learning. In fact, learners' limited proficiency in English is also a stumbling block for their communication with their teacher.

Difficulty in communication in English

Another reason for learner preferences for a bilingual class was their difficulties in communicating with the teacher in English. King Ying and Lai Yee pointed out their problems in communicating in English with the teacher and also classmates in the following excerpts:

If the teacher doesn't speak Chinese, we can't communicate with each other. (King Ying)

If it is a bilingual class, we can communicate because the teacher will translate things in Chinese. If it is an English-only class, we can't communicate [with the teacher]. (Lai Yee)

Using L1 can facilitate the communication between the teacher and learners since the teacher can translate difficult words, phrases

or concepts into learners' L1 and learners may use L1 to express their thoughts or ideas. The excerpts show that being able to communicate with the teacher was considered very important in the learning process by these learners. As revealed by the participants, using L1 not only narrows the communication gap but also can facilitate understanding since they experienced the problems of understanding the teacher and the difficulties in asking questions in English during the lessons.

Problems of understanding the teacher

Participants reported that another reason why they preferred a bilingual class was due to the problems of understanding the teacher. Not only did L1 use assist them in understanding, it served as a kind of cognitive support for helping them to remember what they had learned previously. In addition, the role of a bilingual teacher as an interpreter and the difficulty in following a native speaker English teacher's speech were provided as the reasons for preferring L1 use. This is illustrated in the following excerpts:

If it is not a bilingual class, we can't understand and remember things. I wouldn't be able to follow. (Lai Yee)

I certainly can't follow in an English only class. (Mei Kuen)

We can't understand native English teacher because the way they pronounced English is different from us Chinese...They speak too fast...it is easier for us to learn from a bilingual teacher because when we say a sentence, he will translate it for us ... (Mei Ha)

Lai Yee suggested that teacher's use of L1 assisted her to understand and follow the lessons. Looking at this issue from learner perspectives, it would be quite an embarrassing experience, especially for adult learners, if one could not follow the lessons or the teacher's instructions. Similarly, Mei Kuen suggested that she had difficulty in following the lessons if it was conducted all in English. In the excerpt, Mei Ha also shared her learning experiences with native speaker English teachers and how she could not

understand the teachers' talk which was too fast for her and perhaps in a different accent.

In the following excerpt, Mo Ying also contrasted her difficulty in understanding abstract concepts in lessons delivered solely in English with the ease of understanding and remembering difficult vocabulary when the L1 was used.

...for example... talk about vocabulary... for example eating, getting dressed...erm....use English...use that...that is. <As she said, she was miming those actions>. (Mo Ying)

Actions? (Researcher)

Actions, then [we can] still understand. For some [vocabulary items] which are not actions, then it is difficult. We can't understand what it is. But in a bilingual class, the teacher uses Chinese to explain a vocabulary item; we can understand it easily and can remember it better. (Mo Ying)

Difficulty in asking questions in English

Participants reported that they faced the difficulty in asking questions in English in class, which is an important and useful learning strategy in learning processes. However, with limited English proficiency, these interviewees experienced great difficulty in asking questions in English. The lesson observation data suggested that learners in this class frequently had to switch to Chinese to ask questions during the lessons when they were in doubt. In the interview, Mei Ha explained her difficulty in asking questions in English with a native speaker English teacher:

We can ask him [the bilingual teacher] questions. If we don't know how to speak in English, how can we ask the native speaker teacher questions? It's very difficult. How can the teacher explain it to you [us] easily? (Mei Ha)

Mei Kuen also suggested that if she could not follow, she could ask her classmates for help in a bilingual class.

In a bilingual class, I can ask other classmates some questions if I don't understand. (Mei Kuen)

Answers relevant to Research Question 2

Importance of a bilingual class

To answer the second research question about the importance of a bilingual class to this group of learners, learners were asked a hypothetical question of whether they would enrol in any English program if no bilingual class was available. The result was an unanimously negative reply. This revealed the importance of a bilingual class in maintaining learners' enrolment in English programs. Mo Ying, a learner in her forties, had been living in Australia for four years and it was surprising that she had received formal English instruction of only about 32 hours. The reasons for such a phenomenon were worth investigating. Mo Ying, in fact, started learning English in an English-only class about three years previously when she first arrived in Australia but dropped out because she could not follow the lessons. The following excerpt describes her drop-out experience:

Three years ago, I learned English for a while with a local English-speaking teacher. The teacher gave instructions all in English and most students in the class could not follow. Later, all those who started learning at the same time as I did, they all dropped out. Some went to bilingual classes in other centres later. At the time when I arrived in Australia, no bilingual class was available. (Mo Ying)

From Mo Ying's learning experience, it showed that the availability of a bilingual class had a great impact on maintaining migrants' enrolment in English programs. Another learner, Lai Yee, also had learned English previously but she had to stop because of personal health issues. She re-enrolled in the present English program after realising the availability of a bilingual class from reading a Chinese local newspaper. In the interview, she reported:

I read an advertisement in the local Chinese newspaper saying that there is a bilingual class here in this centre. That's why I came along and started learning English again. (Lai Yee)

To sum up, the data showed that learners preferred to study in a bilingual class because of their low English level and the difficulty in communicating with the teacher which was attributed to the problem of understanding and the difficulties in asking questions. They all recognised the L1 as a pedagogical tool as well as a cognitive tool, adopted a positive attitude towards using it and believed that it could facilitate their learning in English. The data also indicated that bilingual classes were considered important for some learners who were attracted to re-enrol in English learning program because of the availability of bilingual classes.

Answers relevant to Research Question 3

Teacher attitudes towards L1 use

In the interview, the bilingual teacher was asked to share his views on using L1 in teaching this class and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using the L1 in teaching English to beginner learners. When evaluating L1 use, he thought that it was useful for explaining abstract ideas and grammar items:

For advantages, I can explain things more clearly ... like abstract ideas and also grammar points. (Mr Chen)

The teacher also expressed the difficulties in explaining abstract ideas to beginner level students. On the one hand, it was ineffective to use only English to explain abstract ideas because they could not understand the explanations in English. On the other hand, it was impossible for him to use realia to explain every concept in class. The following excerpt illustrates this:

... if students can't understand your explanation in English, so ... you might have to go another way....try to explain. Maybe they still don't really quite understand what you mean. When you have low level students, explaining in English it is not very effective

sometimes...Especially when you have to explain some abstract ideas. I can't show everything. (Mr Chen)

Mr Chen also believed that using L1 could assist his learners in retaining new vocabulary items. His view was similar to Mo Ying's idea that it was easier to remember words which were explained in the L1. The classroom observation data showed that Mr Chen made use of some Chinese words that have similar sounds to some English words to help learners remember the English pronunciation. For example, he used '不明白' (Pinyin⁴=bù míng bái) for 'badminton', '開個路' (kāi gè lù) for 'kangaroo' and '離婦' (lí fù) for 'leave'. He explained in the interview that he used this strategy because students had difficulty following English sounds and using Chinese words could help them remember the pronunciation. In fact, some learners were found to use a similar learning strategy to help them remember the pronunciation of newly learned English words during the lesson observations in the computer laboratory. For example, they wrote '啊坡' (ā pō) next to 'apple' and '曼格' (màn gé) next to 'mango' to help them remember the pronunciation.

When discussing the disadvantages of using L1, he expressed concerns about excessive dependence on the L1, the lack of opportunities for learners to practise English and the time spent on repetitions:

For disadvantages, students might become reliant on the explanation in L1 and get less opportunity to practise in English...repeat the same thing in another language may take more time. (Mr Chen)

To sum up, the data showed that the teacher recognised the importance of using L1 for low level students, especially for explaining abstract ideas and assisting learners with the retention of English pronunciation. However, he was also concerned about students' over-reliance on L1 explanations, their having less opport-

⁴ Pinyin is a Romanization system for Standard Mandarin.

unity to communicate in English and the extra time spent for repetitions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that this group of adult immigrant English learners had a strong preference for a bilingual class, regardless of their relative proficiency level in class. Using L1 in English instruction was considered very important to these participants and the reasons they suggested for choosing to study in a bilingual class were both pedagogical and cognitive, with pedagogical benefits as their main concerns. Because of their beginner's level and age, these learners had difficulties in following the lessons if they were conducted only in English. With a bilingual teacher who could give instructions in both languages, they could understand and follow the lessons more easily. They could also communicate with the teacher easily, give responses in their L1 if they could not answer in English and ask questions in L1 when clarification was necessary. This indicates that the L1 could function as a linguistic 'scaffold' for these learners, which enables them to accomplish activities that they could not achieve alone. Without the teacher's 'scaffolding' in the L1, it would be very difficult if not impossible for these mature-aged learners to use computer software for independent learning.

Using L1 could also provide cognitive benefits of learning words of abstract meaning and retaining the meaning and pronunciation of new vocabulary. It is noteworthy that no participants mentioned the value of the L1 as a psychological tool as reported in Murray and Wigglesworth (2005). Their overall positive comments on bilingual classes showed their recognition of the significant contribution of their first language towards learning English. Such findings are consistent with those of Schweers (1999), who found that Spanish learners adopted a positive attitude towards using Spanish in learning English, and Chau (2001) who reported students' positive comments on bilingual sessions and students' preference for a more

frequent and longer session. Similar positive learner attitudes were also found in Muir (2001).

Generalisation beyond the context of this study should be practised with cautions because it is most likely that migrant learners from other language backgrounds, age groups or proficiency levels will have different attitudes towards L1 use. In some previous empirical studies conducted in adult migrant settings in Australia, the findings indicated that not all the migrant learners who had L1 support preferred using it. According to a bilingual teacher, younger learners did not prefer using L1 frequently because they were concerned about overdependence and that L1 use would hinder their progress in learning English (Lin, 2005). In the same research project, a bilingual assistant reported that some learners preferred to have bilingual support about twice per week, but not every day (Dorranian, 2005). Two questions remain: How much L1 support should be given so that learners would not become too dependent on it? Do younger learners prefer not to use L1?

The interview data revealed information about the drop-out experience of Lai Yee and Mo Ying. Their dropping out and re-enrolling in a bilingual class confirmed the findings in Auerbach (1993), Wigglesworth (2003) and Rivera (1990, as cited in Chau 2001) that providing a bilingual program can attract former drop-outs or unserved students to enrol again. The importance of a bilingual class to the learner participants in this study was clearly shown by the suggestion that they would give up learning English if the teacher did not speak their home language. This also concurs with Piasecka's (1988) findings that '... some people will attend a class only if the teacher speaks their first language' (p.101) and Murray and Wigglesworth's (2005) findings that many students who needed L1 help would not attend lessons when the bilingual assistant was not available on certain days. This clearly reveals the importance of a bilingual class to some learners and the important function of L1 as 'scaffolding' of learning.

The interview with the teacher indicated that he realised the advantages of using L1 to explain abstract ideas and grammatical items. This concurs with Chau's (2001) suggestion that L1 could be used to explain 'complex and abstract points'. However, the teacher in this study was worried that students might have excessive dependence on L1 and similar concerns had been reported previously (Atkinson, 1987; Harbord, 1992; Murray & Wigglesworth, 2005; Nation, 2003). More research into the optimal use of L1 and when L1 use could best benefit L2 learning is needed. To sum up, the learner participants adopted a positive attitude towards L1 use and both the teacher and participants considered the use of L1 valuable in English learning.

Limitations and implications

This study aimed at investigating a group of older migrant learners of Chinese background and gaining insight into their beliefs and attitudes towards using L1. One limitation of this research lied on the biased nature in sampling. Since the participants voluntarily enrolled in a bilingual English program as opposed to a monolingual one, it was possible that they have already adopted a positive attitude towards the use of L1 in the classroom.

However, the results of this research have several practical implications in adult migrant English teaching settings, program management and classroom language use. First, in teaching English to mature-aged beginner immigrants, using L1 may be a valuable resource which facilitates the communication between teachers and learners, improves learners' understanding and assists in the explanations of abstract concepts. In this study, many participants attributed their preference for using L1 to their age.

Second, the present research also contributes knowledge which can assist English program management for adult migrants. According to Murray and Wigglesworth (2005), of the 100,000 immigrants who came to Australia in the 2003-04 financial year, about half were from non-English language backgrounds and some

did not have functional English language skills. These immigrants need to learn English so that they can function well in society. The issue of the attitudes towards using the L1 is therefore important because teacher attitudes govern their choice of teaching methods and materials whereas learner attitudes affect their responses to the teaching approach. Learners need to trust the teaching method through which they are taught. The acceptance or rejection of L1 use by teachers and learners affects the administrators' decision on the availability of bilingual classes. If L1 use is a preference for learners and teachers, more bilingual classes are needed. Perhaps the challenges to language service providers are the lack of bilingual teachers and assistants, and the wide range of linguistic backgrounds among immigrants. Murray and Wigglesworth (2005) reported that a range of 34 languages was represented in the 14 migrant English classes involved in their study. From the government statistics, the AMEP clients represented 189 countries of birth during the 2006-07 period (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009). Therefore, it may be difficult to allocate learners from the same language background to study in the same class and match them with a bilingual teacher from the same language background to form a bilingual class.

Apart from bilingual support in classrooms, it is essential to provide more bilingual teaching and learning materials. At the moment, not many written bilingual resources are available for immigrants (McMahon, 2005) but course books that are used currently can be adapted by adding translated vocabulary items and instructions. Bilingual dictionaries and computer language software can also be useful for teaching and learning.

Third, this study also has implications for classroom language policy in adult migrant learning contexts. It shows that the 'English-only' classroom is not the setting most preferred by this group of beginner learners and so the belief that the 'English-only' classroom is a perfect classroom for learning English should be challenged. Phillipson (1992) suggests "the tenet that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker is a twin of the tenet that English is best taught

monolingually" (p.25). Following this, there is the question of whether a bilingual teacher is more suitable for mature-aged beginner English learners than a monolingual teacher.

Future research

In this study, one of the reasons given for bilingual class preference was learners' low level of English. McMahon (2005) suggests that L1 may play an important role at higher levels but not many empirical studies have been conducted. Future research should focus on L1 use beyond beginner levels and discover if higher level students can also benefit from some form of L1 support. The following questions are worth investigating: How much L1 should be used in higher levels? Do higher level adult migrant learners adopt a positive attitude towards using L1? Future research on the attitudes towards using the L1 among different groups of teachers and learners may also yield interesting results. Bilingual teachers, bilingual assistants and monolingual teachers may have different opinions. Learners from a bilingual class and those from a multi-lingual class may also have different views about bilingual support. Would those learners who do not share the same L1 with bilingual assistants feel that they are disadvantaged?

To conclude, this research provided a primary source of data collected from learners and the findings reveal that all the learner participants showed a strong preference for a bilingual class. In addition, the teacher recognised both the advantages and disadvantages of using the L1. By using L1, a teacher starts from where a student is, what a student is familiar with, and helps them make progress. It is a stepping stone for beginners or less confident learners to move on to a mainstream class where they are expected to communicate more effectively in the target language.

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APPENDIX A: LEARNER INTERVIEWS QUESTIONS

| Themes | Questions |
|------------------------------|---|
| Background information | 1. What is your home language? 2. What is your education level? 3. How old are you? |
| Learning experiences | 4. How long have you been living in Australia? 5. How long have you been studying English? |
| Reasons for learning English | 6. Why do you study English? |
| Research questions | 7. Do you like to study in a bilingual class? 8. What are your reasons for choosing to study in a bilingual class? 9. If there was no bilingual class, would you enrol in any English class? Why? |

APPENDIX B: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background information of the class

1. How long does a lesson last?
2. How many learners are there in this class?
3. What is the proficiency level of this group of learners?
4. What is the age range of these learners?
5. What is the educational background of these learners?
6. Please comment on the language learning ability and motivation of this group of learners.
7. Why do learners have a note book? What is the purpose of keeping this notebook?

Questions about L1 use

1. How many bilingual classes are offered in this centre?
2. What is your opinion about using learner's first language for learning English?
3. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using learner's first language?
4. Why did you use '不明白' for 'badminton', '開圍路' for 'kangaroo' and '離場' for 'leave' in the previous lesson?