

Learner's Dialect Use by EFL Instructors: A Study of Junior High School Teachers in a Minority Area of China

Wen Lai¹ Han Lai^{2*} Fang Zheng³

1. Hubei Minzu University, Enshi, Hubei, 445000, China

2. Huanghuai Univeristy, Zhumadian, Henan, 463000, China

3. Zaoyang High School, Wudian, Zaoyang, Xiangyang, Hubei, 441214, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 12 March 2022

Revised: 19 March 2022

Accepted: 24 April 2022

Published Online: 30 April 2022

Keywords:

EFL

Dialect use

Junior high school

Ethnic minority areas

ABSTRACT

The use of learners' L1 (first language) in the EFL classroom has been widely discussed in the literature. However, the use of local dialects has received less attention. Thus, this study investigates the use of Enshi dialect in EFL classroom in junior high schools in order to explore how teachers deploy the learners' own dialect in EFL classroom and its effect. The Enshi dialect which is a variant of Mandarin is frequently used in daily life in Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 15 teachers who adopt Enshi dialect in EFL classroom teaching in junior high schools in 8 minority villages in Enshi. The results indicate that occasional dialect use does exist in EFL classroom teaching for junior high school students in ethnic minority areas. In addition, four main benefits are revealed when learners use dialects in EFL classes. Teaching English by using dialect helps students to improve the mastery of English grammar, distinguish pronunciation, understand the meaning of English words, phrases and sentences, and enliven the classroom atmosphere. The research also shows that the effective use of learners' dialects in the EFL classroom plays positive roles in English learning.

1. Introduction

Mandarin is a standardized language that is popular throughout China. It is formulated according to certain standards and is a language form for people from various regions to communicate. There are also many dialects in China for the development of languages. Dialects usually refer to language variants formed in a particular geographic area. An important feature of dialect is that it has not yet been standardized^[1]. Dialects are frequently used in daily life so that to some extent they may have positive or negative influences on learning of another language.

Xie^[2] and Yang^[3] research the negative transfer of dialect phonetics to the English phonetics and intonation and

put forward some strategies to cope with this phenomenon. On the other hand, some researches demonstrate the benefits of using dialect. For example, Abi-Hashem^[4] proposes that local dialect use in EFL can provide students with language practice resources that can sharpen their culture awareness, expand their cultural knowledge and maximize their language exposure with the local culture in English.

In view of the different opinions towards dialect in English language teaching, the author conducted a series of research projects in this area and was awarded provincial research funding to investigate the influence of dialects in EFL classroom teaching. The current study is

*Corresponding Author:

Han Lai,

Huanghuai Univeristy, Zhumadian, Henan, 463000, China;

Email: han.lai@hotmail.com

a part of this funding project. This paper reports from the teachers' perspective on the design and implementation of dialect use in EFL and explores its performances. The semi-structured interviews will be adopted to investigate this phenomenon. The research aims to investigate how teachers teach English with dialects and its effects. The significance of this study is to help English teaching in ethnic minority areas.

2. Literature Review

More recently, there has been considerable interest in the roles of learners' mother tongue in foreign language learning and teaching^[5]. Hall and Cook^[6] reviewed the research on this topic, and conducted a global survey of attitudes and practices in English instruction. The findings of the Hall and Cook's^[7] project reveals that many teachers employ their students' mother tongue to explain vocabulary and grammar, to manage classroom events, and to develop rapport with students, and this seems to have become a kind of trend whose value is taken for granted. Ellis^[8] claims that in the sociocultural framework, the L1 can serve as a valuable source of background knowledge and information to prepare the students for L2 input. Anton and DiCamilla^[9] further explain the sociocultural framework, claiming that L1 use turns the students' native language into a powerful tool that can be used in student-student interaction in order for the students to better relate with one another, understand the directions of a task and complete the task. In other words, it is the L1 that taps into the cognitive processes of the students and helps them to more effectively complete the L2 task, while at the same time validating their social identities. Al-Dera^[10] suggests that L1 may play an effective role in the language classrooms at all these levels. L1 is useful for explaining the meaning of difficult words and use of grammar. In this study, the influence of the first language will also be discussed. The dialect is the teacher and learner's first language.

Teaching English by using dialect is equivalent to a process of transfer language. García and Wei^[11] traces the origin of translanguaging which is defined as "a pedagogical practice where students are asked to alternate languages for the purposes of receptive or productive use" (p. 20). They also elaborate on their own interpretation of translanguaging as "the fluid language practices of bi- or multilinguals who move between and beyond the systems in their linguistic repertoire, drawing upon multiple semiotic resources appropriate to given contexts to language and make meaning of both themselves and their surrounding environments." Otheguy et al.^[12] claims the translanguaging as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful

adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages". According to the definitions of translanguaging, translanguaging is a procedure to alternate language in order to make sense of the use language and make a connection between different languages.

Otheguy, García & Reid^[12] compare a unitary view which thinks that there is no correspondence in a dual or multiple linguistic and a dual correspondence theory which claims that bilinguals possess two separate linguistic systems whose boundaries coincide with those of the two named languages. In light of comparison, they state that, "a much healthier educational climate is created by teachers who adopt the unitary view sponsored by translanguaging system." Kaufhold^[13] investigates how students develop their academic writing across language codes and registers in the multilingual contexts of a Swedish university. The findings also suggest that the metaphor of translanguaging space which is a space for the act of translanguaging as well as a space created through translanguaging can be fruitfully applied as a pedagogic tool.

Zavala^[14] shows that through translanguaging strategies or the movement and fluidity between Quechua and Spanish-Silvia constructs a community of legitimate Quechua speakers and empowers students, both the ones with high proficiency in Quechua and the ones with less proficiency. Rosiers, Van Lancker & Delarue^[15] investigates the interactional behavior and the socio-pedagogical valorization of translanguaging practices of teachers and pupils in a multilingual and a monolingual classroom. Their analysis demonstrates differences in the nature of translanguaging practices: norm-breaking in the multilingual classroom versus turning back to the norm in the monolingual classroom. Translanguaging practices occur in the margin or in the center of the classroom activity, with socio-emotional purposes in both classroom settings. Pedagogical goals, however, are only observed in the multilingual classroom.

However, there are some scholars who do not support the translanguaging strategies. For example, Jaspers, J.^[16] argues that translanguaging is likely to be less transformative and socially critical than is suggested, because translanguaging research has more in common with the monolingual authorities it criticizes than it may seem, because it is on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted, and because translanguaging, in some of its representations, is becoming a dominating rather than a liberating force. Nguyen^[17] examines Vietnamese ethnic minority students' translanguaging beliefs and practices, and their identity construction through translanguaging. Findings suggest that the students reveal or perform different fea-

tures of their trans-identity and their translanguaging between their ethnic language and Vietnamese mostly reflect their ongoing shift from the L1 to Vietnamese rather than in the opposite direction. Translanguaging seems to be a threat for endangered minority languages in monolingual ideology politics.

Above all, there are both advantages and disadvantages of translanguaging. So, the effects of using dialects in EFL classroom should be investigated and the appropriate way to display translanguaging should be discussed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The survey was conducted in Enshi, a minority prefecture in the southwest corner of Hubei province, adjacent to Chongqing and Hunan province. Enshi is a minority area with Tujia and Miao people assembling and other ethnic minorities living scattered. The ethnic population occupies 54%. Enshi has 8 counties and cities, namely Enshi, Lichun, Hefeng, Xuanen, Xianfeng and Jianshi. Although the dialects of the eight counties have similarities, their dialects exist differences. This paper focuses on the Enshi dialects which were spoken in Enshi county. Owing to the ethnic languages having been Chinesized, the Enshi dialect is frequently used by people from different nations in daily life. The Enshi dialect is a branch of the southwest mandarin dialect and its initial consonant system is different from Mandarin ^[18]. Zhang ^[19] suggests that there are 21 consonants in Mandarin and only 19 in the Enshi dialect which do not have l and f. The people in Enshi cannot actually distinguish “n” and “l”, “h” and “f” and level-lingual and cacuminal.

The selection of the survey schools was based on a preliminary study. Before the survey, we learned that there were occurrences of dialect use in English teaching in rural high schools in Enshi county. The investigation didn't involve any English teachers in city high schools, as the official school language in the city high school is Mandarin. With mandarin even being integrated into English classrooms, the English teachers in the city are required to speak Mandarin in class. In each case, the principals in junior high school were approached by the researcher, informed about the survey being conducted, and asked for permission to conduct interviews with teachers. By initially asking all English teachers briefly, those teachers who had integrated dialect into class were selected as interview candidates for our study. Altogether, 15 junior high school teachers participate in this study. All of them worked in the rural junior high schools of 8 village-central junior

high schools in Enshi county.

3.2 Methods

The tool used to collect data was a semi-structured interview with teachers. This interview is aimed at obtaining information about teachers' use of dialects and its effects. Drever ^[20] claims that semi-structured interviewing is a very flexible technique for small-scale research. It is not appropriate for studies involving many people, but is most helpful in mini-studies and case studies. The research method of sitting in on and recording classes is not adopted in the study, due to the fact that the teachers tend to prepare and teach their whole class in English if they are informed the class will be audited or recorded.

The interviews were conducted in 8 villages in Enshi county and normally lasted about one hour. There were 15 teachers interviewed in total. The concrete procedures are demonstrated in detail.

Step 1: The author pacified the teachers who participated in this research in order to make them not feel nervous and continue to integrate dialects into EFL classroom.

Step 2: During the interview, the interviewees and the researcher communicated in mandarin or dialect depending on the interviewee's choice, which helped the interviewees feel relaxed and free. The interview used to elicit responses involved the following questions:

- When have you used dialect in your instruction in class?
- Can you demonstrate some examples that you use dialect in EFL classroom?
- Do you think dialect is helpful for your English teaching?

Step 3: The data of interview were recorded and then transcribed by the first author. The accuracy of the transcripts was checked back against the recordings by the second author. The examples would be extracted from the transcripts which were used in the Results and Discussion and were translated into English by the second author.

Step 4: The second author collated and analyzed the data. During the analysis procedure, the initial reading of the transcripts for general meaning was followed by coding and classifying benefits of dialect use and the second reading was used to count the number of instances of each category.

4. Results and Discussion

In this survey, only instructors' language is investigated. In class the instructor applies the dialect and English. From the survey, over two thirds of the teachers present the dialect spontaneously, and only fewer teachers prepare the relevant materials about dialects for teaching. However, their teaching almost demonstrates good results.

The reports below demonstrate the four main benefits for teachers' instruction with dialect in EFL class.

4.1 Improving the Mastery of English Grammar

Because there are no verb tenses in Chinese, many teachers believe that teaching tense is difficult in junior high school. While this situation can become easier when students use dialects in teaching.

My students always expect that they will be able to express what they think and what they see in daily life in English, after they learn English. For example, I teach "would have done", which is "wo an zhi zuo de" in dialect. Likewise, "could have done" is "wo na men bu xing nuo" in dialect. "should have done" is in dialect "zhe jiu gao she da, wo na men mei zuo luo", and "must have done something" means "wo ying shi gao a de ya" in dialect (Teacher 1).

The teachers stated that they used local dialect in English class for grammatical comparisons. It is a good way for students to understand the English grammar.

4.2 Distinguishing Pronunciation

Pronunciation comparisons between dialect and English were also used in class instruction. Here teachers work to ensure that the students focused on differences between English pronunciation and dialect pronunciation. Almost all teachers stated that they used English and dialect sound differences effectively to teach English:

Many students do not notice the "r" sound. I tell my students "r" sound is not quite the same as our dialect "r" sound with not flat lip. (Teacher 14)

The students pronounce English the same as dialect sound. There is no "n" sound in Enshi dialect and this sound is pronounced through nose and the students always drop "n and l" in the words "film, kind, wall, find". (Teacher 2)

I simply distinguish each English sound from dialect sounds. For example, the "e" sound in the dialect is exactly the same as in English [e], such as "te se" in dialect is pronounced as [te][se], so local students learn the vowel sound of [set] with dialect pronunciation on the same line. (Teacher 7)

In the survey, the teachers made clear that the students emphasized the similarities and differences between English sounds and dialect sounds. This awareness assisted the students to learn easily and master accurately.

4.3 Understanding the Meaning of English Phrases and Sentences

The key points evidenced in the interviewees' state-

ments about dialect use were about teaching language. The teachers stressed that their goals were to maximize target language use in class but they also stated that dialect resources were necessary:

We use dialect when vocabulary is challenging for the students. For example, when we introduce words like "extremely" and "terribly"... we can use dialect, which is easier for students to remember, such as "lei hen la", "xi huan can le", "hao wan le". (Teacher 9)

I use the dialect to explain some words, for example, I teach modal verbs "can, need, can't, may, must" like this: "This baby has just turned a year old and can go. Zhe ge xiao hai gang man yi sui jiu zou de da", "ni hen zang, ni zai de zhuo xi da", "wo mei de fa zuo da", "yao de hao (may)", "ni guo ren ying shi yao zhen men gao sha (must)" (Teacher 11)

It often happens that students immediately grasp some kinds of phrases, if I find a familiar dialect phrase with the same meaning as an English phrase like "have a look, have a swim..." ("kan yi ha ha er, you yi ha ha er" in dialect). (Teacher 13)

We use dialect to translate some sentences when the students feel it is more appropriate and to help them remember them better. For example, "It's none of your business" is "guan ni mo zi shi sha", "She paid no attention to what he said" is "guan ta shuo mo zi, ta yi dian er dou bu shuai shi ta", and "close to" is "ai dao qi". (Teacher 8)

Dialect was used by teachers to convey the meaning of English language in three cases. First, the teachers used dialect to introduce the English language, so that the students could understand. Second, to avoid misunderstandings, the teachers elicited the relevant dialect items. Overall, dialect use in English teaching could help students learn language, express their thoughts better, and cultivate intercultural understanding.

4.4 Enlivening the Classroom Atmosphere

The fourth function evidenced in the survey about dialect use was to motivate the class. Teachers and students worked to ensure that the students focused on classroom activities, as shown in the quotes below:

When I speak dialect, I rarely find the students losing focus. For example, "I want you to memorize this passage, can "you ha shu ma" (have big chance to success). I remember the students laughing at once, feeling relaxed. (Teacher 10)

Dialect use can add some color to our dull learning. I remember, once, "... But It's very noble of you to look after my pets when I was out." "or if you gao liang da (have a cold), you'll fear sniffing and sneezing..." (Teacher 8)

I can't help using some linking words in dialect. For

example, “Today I’ll tell you a story. Now look at the picture, please. This is a jungle ... And (jie dao qi) the rabbit is quicker than the panda, (wow, cool ha ge za) the elephant is stronger than the tiger”. (Teacher 14)

Many times, I haven’t prepared dialect contents before class, and, all of sudden, I blurt out some dialect. For example, “we have some difficulties. But how can we solve them? (oh, dear, gao she da). Can you (shen qi) hold?” (Teacher 4)

Without establishing any rules, the teachers adopted a rather relaxed approach in two cases. First, there were teachers who exploited dialect links between dialect and English. Second, some teachers reported making general remarks in dialect when a new topic was going to be discussed and students’ performance is to be praised.

5. Conclusions

In this survey, the data are collected only from interviews with teachers, and there are no classroom observation records. Despite this limitation, the data, the product of the natural classroom, with no experimental intervention conducted, do provide several interesting findings and implications for teaching English while using dialects in EFL classroom. The research shows that the effective use of learners’ dialects in the EFL classroom plays an active role in English learning. From the results of teachers’ interviews, (1) dialect use does exist in EFL classroom teaching of junior high school students in minority areas; (2) dialect use in English classes provides four benefits: improving the mastery of English grammar, distinguishing pronunciation, understanding the meaning of English words, phrases and sentences, and enlivening the classroom atmosphere.

Although the dialects play a positive role in EFL classroom, there are also some aspects that should be noticed during the process of teaching. a) The teacher needs raise awareness about adopting dialects on account of the benefits of integrating dialects into EFL classroom. b) The teacher need control the quantity of dialects that will be integrated into class. c) The teacher need make her students reflect about dialects and issues of power and ideology underlying language use. It helps them to apply language in reality and the culture that exists in dialects. d) When discussing dialects with students, the teachers should encourage students to think critically about language, and in this sense students’ critical language awareness will be formed^[14].

The general picture that emerges from the analysis of the data is that the learners’ dialect is used in response to the linguistic forms. The teachers clearly see their learners’ learning needs and achieve their teaching goals more

effectively. The study focuses on teachers’ classroom language. Although the learners’ first language can affect and interfere with the learning of a foreign language, what is called “language transfer”^[21], in the interviews, English teachers emphasize the positive transfer effect of dialects on English learning and the effectiveness of English teaching.

Teachers, of course, also have a professional obligation to convey foreign language meanings accurately. In this study, the teachers use dialect in classroom teaching to the extent, which promotes English learning. Use of dialects in class can create a realistic context, so as to expand the opportunities for students to learn and use English. In the interviews, the teachers express their views that they do their best to engage with students’ interests, find a way of translanguaging. At the same time, students are influenced by teacher’s instruction, which cultivates their sense of local responsibility, establishes local self-confidence and realize the charm of dialect.

This is a fairly modest piece of research derived specifically from interviews with teachers or in junior schools in one minority area in China. Its insights need to be explored further in different sorts of areas using questionnaire surveys with different groups of students, in which a broader qualitative and quantitative analysis can be done. The appropriate time and quantity of dialect used in EFL classroom should also be discussed.

References

- [1] Heng, G.Zh., 2016. A Study on the Differences between Dialect and Mandarin. *Language Planning*. (15), 79-80.
- [2] Xie, J., 2014. Negative Transfer of Henan Dialects to English Phonetic Acquisition and Teaching Strategies. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Education Science Edition)*. 27(12), 100-102.
- [3] Yang, X.J., 2014. A Study on the Negative Transfer of Dongbei Dialect to English Phonetic Learning and Teaching Strategies. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Education Science Edition)*. 27(05), 124-126.
- [4] Abi-Hashem, N., 2015. Revisiting cultural awareness and cultural relevancy. *American Psychologist*. 70(7), 660-661.
- [5] Paweł, S., Anna, D., 2018. Own-language use in teaching English to preschool children. *ELT Journal*. 72(4), 374-383.
- [6] Hall, G., Cook, G., 2012. Own-language use in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*. 45(3), 271-308.
- [7] Hall, G., Cook, H., 2014. Own-language use in ELT:

- exploring global practices and attitudes. *Language issues: The ESOL Journal*. 25(1), 35-43.
- [8] Ellis, R., 2008. *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Anton, M., DiCamilla, F., 1998. Socio-cognitive functions of L1 collaborative interaction in Auerbach, E. R. (1993). *Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom*. *TESOL Quarterly*. 27, 9-32.
- [10] Al-Dera, A.S., 2011. The use of native language in L2 teaching: A case study of English department and preparatory year, Najran University, Saudi Arabia. *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 37(2), 139-156.
- [11] GARCÍA, O., Wei, L., 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [12] Otheguy, R., García, O., Reid, W., 2018. A translanguaging view of the linguistic system of bilinguals. *Applied Linguistics Review*.
- [13] Kaufhold, K., 2018. Creating translanguaging spaces in students' academic writing practices. *Linguistics and Education*. 45, 1-9.
- [14] Zavala, V., 2015. It will emerge if they grow fond of it: Translanguaging and power in Quechua teaching. *Linguistics and Education*. 32, 16-26.
- [15] Rosiers, K., Van Lancker, I., Delarue, S., 2018. Beyond the traditional scope of translanguaging: Comparing translanguaging practices in Belgian multilingual and monolingual classroom contexts. *Language & communication*. 61, 15-28.
- [16] Jaspers, J., 2018. The transformative limits of translanguaging. *Language & Communication*. 58, 1-10.
- [17] Nguyen, T.T.T., 2019. Translanguaging as trans-identity: The case of ethnic minority students in Vietnam. *Lingua*. 222, 39-52.
- [18] Li, L., 2009. Ethnical Dialect: Reflection of the Local Culture of Enshi. *Journal of Hubei Minzu University*. 27(02), 85-88.
- [19] Zhang, L.B., 2007. Initial Consonant System in Enshi Dialect. *Journal of Hubei Institute of Education*.
- [20] Drever, E., 1995. *Using Semi-Structured Interviews in Small-Scale Research. A Teacher's Guide*.
- [21] Odlin, T., 2007. The Evolution of Language out of Pre-language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 29(1), 127-128.