

BELF vs L1 in Communication During Cross Border Collaboration Project Activities

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Mothertongue has been considered as interference in second language learning. There are also teachers and learners who considered it as a supporting mechanism for smoother communication. Most of the time, it surfaces to make up for the shortcomings in the second language proficiency. This paper reports on the surfacing of mothertongue in the English language communication between students of two different nationalities. University Malaysia Perlis and The Haatyai University have conducted a collaborative project for their undergraduate students. Forty students participated from both universities and they were required to produce a business proposal for a product of their group's choice. In order to encourage the English language usage, the participation was restricted to non-Thai speaking for the UniMAP students and non-Malay speaking for the Haatyai University students. The UniMAP students were from the engineering faculty and they were expected to contribute mostly in the production and technical aspect of the business plan whereas, the Haatyai University students were from the Business school and they were expected to contribute mostly in the management and financial section of the business plan. This paper is aimed to find the tasks that compelled the students to resort to their mothertongue. The frequency and tasks for both groups will be compared. The task with significantly low code switching score will also be reported. The data was gathered using two sets of Likert scale questionnaires. The statements for the students' questionnaire requires the students to rate their perception on their own and their friends' language use. It is hope that the findings would add on to the understanding of mothertongue role in English language communication among second language users, in this case engineering students.

Introduction

Exploring how the first language of a second language learner influences his L2 acquisition has been an integral part of the studies for second language researchers. L1 or mother tongue has been long viewed as a form of interference in second language acquisition. There is an assumption that the impact of the L1 on L2 learning can lead to misunderstanding and problem in communication. However, there are also educators and learners who considered L1 as a *supporting mechanism* for a more effective communication. Most of the time, L1 surfaces to make up for the shortcomings in the second language proficiency.

At the border, the people prefer to use their traditional way of communication and it is not too general to say that English is almost unheard in the cross-border street communication amongst the locals. In Malaysia, English is the second language and it is the language widely used in corporate profession and academia. While it is not as widely used in Thailand, the Thais are highly aware of its importance and potential. In an environment where English is less used and even to some extent treated like a foreign language, the English instructors have to find a way to make the students use English. The idea of providing an environment that necessitates the students to use English has drawn the English Instructors from both countries to come up with some alternative measures to promote the use of English. Hence, University Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) and Hatyai University (HU) have come up with a collaborative project for their students. This study describes the experience of UniMAP and HU in using cross-border collaborative project to encourage the English Language Usage among undergraduate students in English as Foreign language environment.

This Collaborative Project is designed in a way that discourages both the Malaysian and Thai students from using any L1 during interaction and to highlight the use of the English Language. BELF or rather Business English Lingua Franca is another factor that contributed to the implementation of this collaborative Project. According to Louhiala-Salminen et al (2005) the term Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) refers to English as a neutral and shared common code among non-native speakers. They justify that BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as hers or his mother tongue. They added that the neutral ground will help the speakers feel safer in utilizing the language.

In the case of the study, UniMAP and HU students share the common code of being on neutral plane where neither of them uses English as their mother tongue thus providing a good chance for a study on the potential of BELF emergence in such cross-border collaboration. This has been made possible when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the management of the two universities. Among other reason for the collaboration is reflected by Zuraida, Zul & Ali (2004). They have

proposed a list of advantages that can be accrued when two universities get together and identify common goals.

1. Enabling the sharing of resources such as academic staff, teaching –learning facilities, research equipment and ideas.
2. Enabling the sharing of ‘name’ and experience amongst the academics
3. Providing enrichment and diversity amongst the students
4. Becoming a platform for quality improvement amongst the staff
5. Capitalizing on existing common ties
6. Making the most of favorable economic circumstances.
7. Exhibiting religious and multi-ethnic harmony

Zuraida, Zul & Ali (2004).

This study analyzes both Malaysian and Thai students’ use of the mother tongue during activities held throughout the collaborative project, the emergence of BELF and relevant implications for teaching methodology. Any two different nationalities would comfortably resort to English language but in this case, given that the participants share border, they may resort to other communication strategy. Given a new type of mix with different linguistic and cultural background will English prevail as the solution for communication? Is English language really used? So, how close are the English instructors to their academic goal? What is the extent of the usage? This paper aims to provide a significant view of the surfacing of L1 or mother tongue in the English Language communication between students from two different nationalities and culture. A better understanding of the L1 influence in the in the ESL context will help teachers identify students' difficulties in learning English. It will also aid in the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies and approaches to help students learn English effectively.

Previous Research Findings

Collaboration is a form of relationship between two (or more) parties; it has variances which include ‘partnership’, ‘affiliation’, ‘join venture’ and ‘alliance’ among many others. (Zuraidah, Zul & Ali 2005). It is needless to say that cross-border collaboration represents different countries, languages and cultures. It is most likely to bring significant changes to the communicative patterns and practices among the project participants.

As Morgan (1998), O’Dowd (2003) and Otten (2003) acknowledge, intercultural competence and language proficiency do not automatically occur by simply bringing together students from different cultures. On the contrary, achievement of these objectives requires shared reflection about social experiences through carefully structured language tasks central to the process of intercultural learning (Candlin, 1987; Muller-Hartmann, 2000; O’Dowd, 2003). Moreover, involving students collaboratively in experiential, meaning-negotiation situations (Muller – Hartmann, 2000) provides not only opportunities for linguistic interaction (Met, 1994), but the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills central to Byram’s (1997) notion of intercultural competence. In any collaboration work, the participants faced significant challenges, especially in the internal communication of the new group combination (Louhiala-Salminen et al 2005).

The UniMAP- HU collaboration project participants were chosen to embark on a new experience and they were conspired to utilize their English language in facing the communication challenges. Their communication skills play a very important role and the fact that their mother tongue turns to be ineffective in

providing the communication support; drove them to make the best out of their English language proficiency. In the collaboration project activity, they confronted new challenges in getting their ideas across and understanding others. English Language instructors in such environment couldn't help but wonder if the students would still cling to their mother tongue or choose English as the lingua franca.

Ardi (2006) in his study on investigating students' foreign language anxiety found most learners experienced a certain degree of anxiety in their FL learning and factors like lack of confidence, lack of preparation and fear of failing the class were identified as the primary causes of their anxiety. He found four strategies which learners usually use in coping with their FL anxiety which are preparation, relaxation, positive thinking and peer seeking. The UniMAP-HU collaboration project were conducted in fun and interesting setting which give ample chance for the participants to apply the strategies revealed by Ardi (2006).

Methodology

The location of the study is at both UniMAP (University Malaysia Perlis), and Hatyai University. Forty students from both universities participated in this project and they were required to produce a Business proposal for a product of their group's choice. In order to encourage the English language usage, the participation was restricted to non-Thai speaking for the UniMAP students and non-Malay speaking for the Haatyai University students. The UniMAP students were from the engineering faculty and they were expected to contribute mostly in the production section and technical aspect of the business plan whereas, the Haatyai University students were from the Business school and they were expected to contribute mostly in the

management and financial section of the business plan. Students were required to use English all the time when they communicating each other.

In the case of this study, the project relay on the sharing of expertise among academic staff, where the HU staff supports the business plan production by assisting the progress in the business content such as developing the Marketing plan, Risk assessment, Financial plan and Revenue projection; whereas the UniMAP staff assist in the soft skill, teambuilding and final oral presentation.

The project also demands a blend of technical and business expertise which requires both the UniMAP and the HU students to work together. The UniMAP engineering students had the opportunity to learn some business oriented content and the HU business students get the opportunity for a first hand experience on how it is to market a technology and how to work with a group of technically inclined people

The data derived from this study is from observations on activity session and participants' perception. Initially, the common communication activity that occurs in the cross border collaboration project was observed and the most occurring activities were identified. The observations generated 28 item statements which described the activity contexts that require language usage. The items can be classified into four language skills which are speaking, listening, reading and writing. The first section of the Questionnaire required the students to rate the frequency of the activity context to occur using a Likert scale of 1 for never and 5 for very frequent. The second section is where the students rated their perception on the frequency of English language usage in the said activity context by using a similar Likert scale. The rating ranged from 1 for the lowest usage and 5 for the highest usage of English. The third section was for

the students to rate their perception on the frequency of using other language than English when facing the 28 activity context. The rating scale started with 1 for the lowest usage and 5 for the highest usage of English language.

The questionnaires were distributed on the last activity day. There were 40 students in the beginning and seven students withdrawn towards the end of the project. 31 questionnaires out of 32 distributed were answered.

Findings and Discussion

The observation by the facilitators states that the students mostly fallback on their L1 when they speak; especially in expressing ideas and giving explanation. Students from both universities use English in activities that require reading and writing. Frequently, the students who are better in English act as translators for their friends. The students speak in English with the facilitators when they are working on the business plan. They code switch to L1 when the situation is informal like during meal time, during the journey on the bus and during visits to interesting places.

The table below illustrates the data from the questionnaire which quizzes on the participants' perspectives on the usage of L1 during the activities.

Item	Activity	UniMAP participants	HU participants
14	Listening to other participants expressing him/herself	H 1 4.307	
15	Receiving information from the other participants	H 2 4.307	H 2 4.153
2	Discussing the title and research topic	L 1 2.467	H 1 4.769
21	Writing out the business idea	L 2 3.307	
27	Writing out the financial plan	L 2 3.307	
28	Writing out the risk assessment		L 1 2.165

24	Writing out the marketing plan	L	2.864
		2	
16	Receiving instruction from the supervisors	L	2.846
		2	
19	Reading feedback from the supervisor	L	2.923
		3	
		(AVG:	(AVG:3
		3.31)	.11)

Table 1: Participants` average score for the perception on the usage of L1 during the activities.

During the project, the students were instructed to use English in all aspect of communication. Resurfacing of mother tongue during the project is perceived as moderate among the HU students and the UniMAP students. The average of the scores by the HU students is 3.11 whereas the average for the UniMAP students` score is 3.31. The explanation for lower average scores among the HU students is obscure in the grey area of the L1. The Thai students could not use their L1 which is Thai language as the Malaysian students can` t understand Thai at all; hence the low rating. However, some of the HU students have resorted to “Yawi” which is similar to Kelantanese Malay dialect.

“Yawi” is a highly divergent dialect of Malay language used in the southern province of Thailand but the language has no official status and it can be understood by the Malaysian students. Kelantanese dialect is a variety of Malay which is considered as L1 for the UniMAP students and this explains the higher rating of L1 usage among the UniMAP students. This is also supported by the UniMAP students` highest rating of 4.307 for item 14 which is “Listening to other participants expressing him/herself”.

Looking at the findings from sociolinguistic view on communication strategy it is interesting to note that in this cross border collaboration project, the highly distinct variety of Malay dialect of Yawi or Kelantanese has emerged as an unconventional choice. It is interesting that some of the participants who are not speakers of the dialect attempted to use the variety. Such moves question the chances of BELF emergence in such cross border situation should there be no proper instruction and supervision.

The implication from the finding is that, any cross-border project with objective of enhancing English language usage among the participants, must take precaution in the selection of participants. It is necessary for the organizer to eliminate candidates who can speak “Yawi” among the Thais and eliminate those who can speak Thai/Siam among the Malaysian participants. Such precaution would serve more justice to the objective of the project and supports the emergence of BELF. Another implication is that, direct instruction or supervision from the supervisors is absolutely necessary in securing the objective of the project.

In carrying out the project, the participants were instructed to use English in all activities involving the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, based on the scores of item 15, students from both universities perceived “receiving information from other participants” is more prevalent in their L1. Information among participants is mostly conveyed orally and the features of oral skill include facial expressions, gestures and body language. With the help from these features, the participants can guess and may also get the message across even when they are not

speaking in the same language. The presence of friends who act as translators also contributes to the result.

It is interesting to note that the HU students perceived Item 2 which is the initial activity of “discussing the title and research topic” as the highest for usage of L1; whereas the UniMAP students ranked the same activity as the lowest. This explains the strategy used by the students when their L1 fails to function effectively in communication. The UniMAP students immediately resort to English as the medium of communication whereas HU students took a few sessions of interactions before resorting to English.

The result for low incident of L1 resurfacing in Item 21, 27, 28, 24, 16 and 19 supports that L1 resurfacing incidences are less in reading and writing activities. BELF has more potential in reading and writing area because the participants do not share the same writing system. Moreover the English writing system which uses Roman alphabets system is highly recognizable by the Malaysian students. Reading and writing also requires concrete material which can be recorded and referred, making supervision more effective. The concrete material makes it is easier for the facilitators to supervise the students’ writing activities compared to speaking activities. Such supervision from the facilitators urges the participants to write mostly in English

Conclusion.

The study suggests that, in this cross border collaboration, L1 is moderately use and mostly resurfaces in context that is less formal and less supervised. For both

Malaysian and Thai students, they perceived that L1 resurfaces most in listening and speaking activity. Even when they don't understand each other, the non-verbal communication aids their understanding and conveys messages across. This is supported by the findings where the listening and speaking tasks are ranked highest among both, HU and UniMAP participants. The emergence of highly distinctive Malay variety of "Yawi" and Kelantanese dialect is natural in such cross border activity therefore; English teachers must take some measures as remedy. Proper instruction, supervision and intervention from the instructors play a vital role in ensuring the usage of English language in such cross border activity.

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