**Spanish Use in the English Classroom:**

**A study of Dominican Students in an English-Only Environment**

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**Abstract**

The native language use in the target language classroom has recently gained the attention of second language acquisition research. This study analyzes such issue in the context of Dominican university students, ranging from 18 to 35 years old, studying in an English immersion program, who have been speaking their native language, namely, Spanish too often in their classrooms. This research focuses on identifying the causes for students to use their native language in the class, and their attitude towards both, Spanish and English, by implementing a survey to 37 of these students. To better understand the problem and create potential strategies to address it, firstly, literature has been visited by presenting relevant research related to second language learning and acquisition. Secondly, the methodology is explained so that the research context can be more readily understood. Subsequently, results from surveys are analyzed in the light of current second language acquisition research. As a conclusion, this study revealed that students use their native language primarily when prompted by their partners, when in need of clarification, when unable to understand a concept, and overwhelmingly as a means to making oneself clear. The teaching implications of these findings are also discussed in the end.

*Keywords*: L1, L2, TESOL, Transfer, Second Language Learning, Language Learning

## Introduction

In recent years, language learning has grown exponentially in the Dominican Republic. People from different backgrounds join language institutes in the hope of mastering English, in order to access better employment opportunities and life conditions. To support the expansion of language learning among the college student population, the Dominican government has created a nearly one-year, nationwide English Immersion Program. This program aims at taking students to the B2 level, as per the Common European Framework of Reference, which labels speakers as "independent users," who can understand main ideas of complex and abstract topics, and are able to hold technical discussions in their specialization field (Common European Framework of References, 2010). Students are supposed to reach such level through four hours of daily instruction, for a period of ten months. This program is in high demand since it has proven to be effective when given the favorable conditions.

However, it is common to see that immersion programs are demanding. Students are mandated to speak only the target language, English, in the premises of the schools in which this program is administered. Unfortunately, due to different communication challenges in students, learners constantly fall into speaking Spanish, their first language (L1),

which is not only discouraged but also prohibited by the program's administration. For instance, on a teacher-training website for this program, it clearly embraces the "total immersion method" as the basis for the English-only policy.

Total immersion engages learners in the second language (L2) during all the period of instruction, allowing no time for their L1 to be considered in the classroom. Additionally, on a statement about the English Immersion Program Teaching Approach, Methodology and Techniques (2015) it was argued that the effectiveness of this method relies on how it optimizes the input received by students, as well as challenging teachers to use a variety of techniques which do not resource in Spanish use. "optimization", as seen through the eyes of the program administrators, is closely intertwined with the idea of total immersion, little to no L1 should be used. The program principles and structure explicitly mandates teachers to speak English only, using realia and other instructional strategies to avoid the language gap.

This paper explores current research discussing the causes and effects of Spanish as an L1 on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Additionally, suggestions are provided to educators on how to motivate their students to maximize the use of the L2 in the classroom, when being expected to do so by their institution. Students' voices were taken into account to add validity and relevance to the pedagogical implications of the data collected.

**L1 and its Influence**

Much has been said about the L1 influence on the Second Language Acquisition process. A myriad of researchers and teachers agree that students' first language is an aid, while others object believing it to be a problem in certain cases. Meyer (2008) argues that the use of the L2 should be maximized whenever possible. The first language primary role is to provide scaffolding, which can lower affective filters by making the L2 comprehensible and the classroom environment feasible for meaningful learning to occur. The L1 plays a secondary role by helping students to anchor L2 concepts to the L1 through use of loan-words, translation activities, and code-switching within storytelling activities (Meyer, 2008).

Contrastively, behaviorism thinks differently about the L1 presence in the classroom. Behaviorist learning theories believe that the old habits of the L1 inevitably interfere with the process of learning the new habits of the L2, and predict that the similarities between the L1 and L2 facilitate L2 learning, while the differences between the two languages lead to negative transfer and errors (Ellis, 1985).

Although the behaviorist account of L2 learning seems to indicate that the L1 plays both a negative and a positive role in language learning, it puts more emphasis on the negative influence of the L1 than its benefits. For example, Ellis (1994) pointed out that "according to behaviorist theories, the main impediment to learning was interference from prior knowledge" (p. 299). In this context, prior knowledge refers to students' first language, and how its structure affects any other second language learning experience. For instance, Wang (2014) observed that "the distinctions between L1 and L2 cause difficulties and mistakes in SLA, while the similarities promote it". Furthermore, language learning, as seen through the behavioral perspective, gives room to understanding L1

as an influence to be overcome through more habit-formation exercises. For instance, Corder (1981) also argues that this theory predicted errors to be 'the results of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language' and that 'consequently a major part of applied linguistic research was devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners of any particular language background'. Thus, L1, in the behaviorist eyes, provides more of a negative influence than a positive one. According to this, language teachers should suppress its use and manifestation through total immersion in the target language.

**Causes for Students Use of L1**

Morahan (2010) presents some reasoning as to why students tend to constantly use L1 in the classroom. According to the study, the use of L1 when doing pair work to construct solutions to linguistic tasks and evaluate written language, is a strong factor. L1 vocabulary allows learners to use the language which they may not yet possess in L2 "to process ideas and reach higher levels of understanding. This applies both to social talk between partners and private talk intended for the learner alone" (p. 2). For example, in private talk, students might utter a non-standard L2 phrase and then self-correct. Morahan (2010) also explains that if students are given a chance to use their native language for communication, the L2 use should also be encouraged and expected in the same or a higher amount. The teacher can expect students to use their L1:

While speaking in order to: ask each other clarifying questions, express frustrations concerning their lack of understanding, clarify meaning of words in L2, find new words in L2 which correspond to already known words in L1, use language to process complex concepts, build shared meaning while evaluating written tasks through shared discussion. (Morahan, 2010).

**L1 in Teaching**

Contrastively, Du (2016) claims that the relationship between L1 and L2 acquisition is important because it affects L2 learning and teaching. Furthermore, the Communicative Approach usually prefers the L2 as the only medium of communication in the classroom, (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), as it also provides extra practice and helps the students be reliant on the target language. Additionally, in a study conducted with a group of Turkish English Language Learners and non-native English teachers, Debreli (2016) analyzed the perspectives of non-native teachers when it comes to L1 use in the classroom. Most of the surveyed teachers admitted having deceived the English-only policy imposed by the institution, and sometimes switched to the students' L1 when giving instructions. Conversely, Littlewood & Yu (2011, as cited in Debreli & Oyman, 2015) found that "the use of L1 does not strengthen learner's cognition but may result in inappropriate transfer of the bad language habits from first language to the target language; thus it should be abandoned" (p. 146). It is evident how second language research has studied the positive and negative effects of the first language in the classroom. One may encounter research supporting both sides, though findings suggest that the L1 does have a positive influence in how the second language is being learned and produced.

Moreover, Krashen's (1987) perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA) suggest that it is the role of the teacher to be a source of optimal comprehensible input to students. In short, drawing back from the

Natural Approach (Krashen &Terell, 1988), the more the students are exposed to the language, the easier it will be for them to understand and process language input, as long as the target language exposure fulfills the conditions of optimal input. According to Krashen (1987) optimal input is comprehensible, interesting and relevant, is not grammatically sequenced, and is sufficient in quantity. In this view, teachers come into action by being constant producers of such input.

**Code-switching**

Evaluating the different aspects influencing students' use of Spanish in the classroom, *code-switching* is a fundamental variable to consider. Lin (2007 as cited in Ibrahim, Shash and Armia, 2013) explains classroom code-switching as "the alternating use of more than one linguistic code in the classroom by any of the classroom participants such as teacher and students". Code-switching is constantly present in the bilingual and foreign language classroom as a remedial device for students with strong communication need. In an attempt to understand code-switching more deeply, the concept of *language mode* allows researchers and language educators to better evaluate this bilingual and monolingual communication behavior. Bilingual and monolingual communication may be governed by the mode being employed at the moment, namely, *bilingual or monolingual mode.* Such modes are also subject to the specifics of the communication settings speakers are engaged in (Heltai, 2018). Additionally, in his research Heltai (2018) states students' genuine communicative interactions are constantly influenced by their L1 due to the limitations of their L2 language proficiency. Conversational code-switching is said to happen subconsciously when different

factors prompt the speaker to switch between languages. Code-switching will most inevitably happen to satisfy a communicative need by speakers who have less proficiency in the L2, and is more likely to override grammatical correctness and accuracy, in an attempt to get the message across (Moore, 2002).

Switching is not only determined by the speaker choice, but may be influenced by external and internal factors to the communicative act the speaker is involved in. In a study in Iranian EFL classrooms, Sarem& Hamidi (2012) found code-switching to happen in the classroom as a response of the teacher's own switching strategy, to which students responded accordingly by using their L1. In most instances, this occured: 1) when something emotional was said, 2) to clarify meaning, 3) when the teacher intentionally initiated code-switching, 4) peer-correction, and 5) when using sarcasm and humor in the classroom (Sarem& Hamidi, 2012). Even though these findings involve teachers as a variable, it is clearer to establish the interactional nature of code-switching in the classroom by seeing its occurrence as related to a stimulus-response phenomenon, as it tends to happen at times.

Another aspect of code-switching relevant to this research is when compensation is needed. For instance, Hughes, Shaunessy, Brice, Ratliff, McHatton (2006) argue that "when code switching is used to compensate for a language difficulty, it may be viewed as interference". The authors, though, view this use of code-switching positive as it it aids comprehension and help speakers make sense of the information being shared. In sum, literature reviewing code-switching places a strong emphasis on its role as a

mediator between speakers to establish communication and convey ideas.

## Methods

### Subjects

In order to receive the necessary information for this research, various procedures and instruments were implemented. Firstly, the subjects were students participating in this research were part of an English immersion program which runs nationally, for ten months, daily in the morning, afternoon, and evening.

However, for this study only students from morning and afternoon were considered. Firstly, a sample of 22 students was surveyed in the morning, representing 10% of the 218 student population. In the afternoon, on the one hand, a sample of 15 students, which represents the 10% of the 149 student population, was invited to take the survey. In sum, a total of 37 students were guided to the institution's computer lab where they could complete a survey on Google Forms.

At the time of the program, students were all simultaneously enrolled in the university as well, as it is a prerequisite to the English course. Ages among the participants ranged from 18 to 35 years.

Finally, the study was conducted in one of the centers running this program, which is located in Santo Domingo, the capital city of the Dominican Republic.

### The Survey

The survey used for this research was an adaptation from the research of Al Sharaeai (2012) on the causes of students' L1 use. In it, a questionnaire was applied to a group of graduate students from diverse proficiency levels and age groups.

In this present research, the survey was simplified for these students by adapting prompts to all levels of proficiency. Prompts included, "I speak Spanish in my class when I am…" If students answered "always," "often," "sometimes," or "rarely," their response was taken as a positive answer since it implied L1 use, no matter its degree.

Contrastively, if the students answered "never," it implied no agreement whatsoever with the statement. The statements were written and organized in a way in which they could easily elicit students' preference without a threatening or institutional tone.

This survey represents a flexible, yet effective, device for voicing students' preferences in a way valuable to second language research. Students' perspectives on this issue should be a primary source of information in order to better analyze this phenomenon in the EFL context. Therefore, in this study, one of the primary questions to address was *"what causes students to speak Spanish in the institution?*

## Research Findings

"Findings suggest that students speak Spanish for several reasons; these reasons vary from internal motivation factors to more substantial and induced factors. Students regularly have something to say, and they choose which language they want to use to convey it (as in code-switching). In fact, an overwhelming majority of students (76.3%) admitted to speaking Spanish in their classes, regardless of the extent, let alone the English-only policy. The conditions and the extent to which this may happen, though, vary and depend on the learners' characteristics and other factors. Among the motivators for said Spanish (L1) use, most of the students admitted to their

use of L1 while: explaining a new point in class (73.4%); while making themselves clear (73.8%); while discussing personal matters (68.5%); checking meaning of new concepts (65.8%); and asking for topic explanation (63.1%). Research suggests that one of the many triggers of first language use in the classroom is the lack of vocabulary and knowledge in the target language (Koronkiewicz, 2018). It could be inferred, thus, that a strong motivator of first language use, is language impairment; i.e. when students are trying to communicate in the target language, but cannot find the right exponents, they may go back to their native language exponents to satisfy their communicative needs. Second, identifying students' attitude towards the L1 is a key step for developing strategies for its reduction in the classroom. Note that this applies to the context where this research is made, in which the use of Spanish as a target language is banned, and other contexts alike. By administering this survey, it was found that students responded positively towards the encouragement for English use only; yet so, they frequently fail to carry out rules and instructions in the language program's context.

Therefore, the main questions were: *How do students feel towards their L1 and L2-only policy in the classroom?* Moreover, *why is that relevant at all?* Students do feel positive towards a teacher who can both understand and speak their L1 in the class. 50% of the students preferred a teacher who shared the same L1 with them. Additionally, 97% of the students expressed their need to be permitted to speak Spanish without punishment, when needed. Surprisingly, 81% answered positively to the English-only policy, and it can be inferred that this is true as long as they are allowed to use Spanish when necessary.

In conclusion, this research found students to have positive considerations about the encouragement placed by the institution to speak only English in the classroom. Yet, the reality proved to be somewhat different. Students in this program could benefit from a teacher who shares their L1 and provides opportunities for students to negotiate meaning and make sense of what is happening in the classroom by using Spanish cues to aid understanding and instructions follow up.

## Implications for Teaching

Although it is not explicitly said, students' responses may argue that lack of clarity in instruction is a trigger for students' L1 use. Such reality challenges teachers in planning instruction and implementing classroom activities. If instructions are clear while doing tasks, this will reduce the need to ask and receive clarification from partner to partner.

In addition, personal matters appear to be another topic of discussion for students which motivates their use of the L1. Teachers must keep this in mind when doing pair and group work. Monitoring students as they participate, collaborate and speak with other classmates might help decrease the time allotted for personal matters. Teachers who constantly encourage and monitor for students' use of the target language should also be mindful of the tasks and the proficiency levels involved in doing completing them. Tasks which are level-appropriate might reduce the learners' need to use Spanish as a resource.

However, activities that require timing and those that push students to finish first should be critically considered so that they do not, implicitly, force students to use their

native language in order to complete the language task first or simply "get rid of the activity". Nevertheless, it may be a challenge for teachers to manage this in large classes. It is essential for teachers, then, to create strategies and it may also be effective to negotiate with students on procedures to be followed in the classroom that encourage L2 use, instead of punishing it. Moreover, teachers need to be aware of the varied factors affecting language acquisition and become more aware of principles of instructed second language acquisition. Krashen and Terell (1987) propose language acquisition as such a complex process that no classroom, not even learner, can be said to be the same. Factors like language aptitude, affective filter, monitor and other individual learning preferences can influence in the way people learn languages.

Another critical aspect for teachers to consider is vocabulary instruction. Need for vocabulary when attempting to communicate in transactional dialogues makes it unavoidable for the students to rely on their L1. Informed EFL teaching should be aware of these factors. For instance, teachers under immersion programs or any other kind of program which ignores student first language's aid, could pay close attention to vocabulary instruction in order to help students navigate imparities between both languages. Vocabulary teaching should be sequenced and classroom activities should yield appropriate linguistic forms and items students are already familiar with. Scaffolding activities by doing vocabulary-building tasks and by simplifying instruction for students also foster an atmosphere where lack of lexical items do not impede communication or classroom performance.

Further, teachers can tremendously help their students by working on confidence and motivation. Confidence is an important factor as it reduces anxiety and provides students with a readiness to talk and share with partners, even to comment and correct on others' mistakes. On the same note, students admitted that the English-only policy in the center was causative of feeling nervous and/or anxious when asked to perform in front of a group. This view has been theoretically defended by many, highlighting Krashen (1982) in his monitor hypothesis, in which he correlates the students' emotions to students' oral production and their overall influence in learning. It follows that the English-only policy, as per students' responses, makes them feel more nervous when it comes to speaking and could cause mistakes, namely, slips when producing orally. Different strategies may decrease students' use of L1 in the classroom. Through another simple survey, it was requested from students to mark common classroom activities that had little to no motivation for their Spanish speaking in the classroom. Students stated that they would not be in the need of using Spanish when their teacher:

- Motivated them to speak in English (87.5%)
- Taught them learning strategies (80%)
- Used a variety of activities and games to practice the target language (77.5%)
- Made them use English for peer interaction (75%)
- Played games that they could use to practice English (75%)
- Made them use English in real-life situations (75%)

These answers reveal substantial data regarding the use of instructional activities to decrease first language use in the class. The survey concluded that motivation,

learning strategies and a variety of activities are factors contributing to L1 decrease in the classroom.

Motivation is one of the causative factors of second language acquisition, as described by Krashen (1982). Motivation, defined by Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (1985), refers to: the factors that determine a person's desire to do something. In Second Language and Foreign language learning, learning may be affected differently by different types of motivation. Two types of motivation are sometimes distinguished: a) Instrumental motivation: wanting to learn a language because it will be useful for certain instrumental goals, such as getting a job, reading a foreign newspaper, passing an examination; b) Integrative motivation: wanting to learn a language in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it. (p.185).

In addition to considering motivation, teaching students learning strategies foster independence and thus, self- awareness. Learning strategies focus attention on the learners and provide them with tools to develop their language skills and extend the language use even when the teacher is not there. Therefore, are inevitably important for teachers to incorporate in their teaching as a means to foster learner's independence. One of the main benefits if independent learning is self-awareness and academic improvement. In  a study carried out by Faraday, Haywood, Meyer, and Sachdev (2008), the researchers discovered that independence or autonomy is worth pursuing in language teaching, as it is likely to result in:1) improved academic proficiency; 2) increased motivation and confidence; 3) and greater student awareness of their limitations and their ability to manage them.

Lastly, another factor students considered important is the use of a variety of instructional activities. Instructional activities are designed to accomplish an educational goal or objective. Regardless of the planning philosophy or school policies, teachers incorporate activities day to day to help students acquire and fluently use the target language. In English Language Teaching (ELT) everyday activities may include  drillings, role- play, pair-work, group-work, task-based learning, and so on. One of the tenets of the communicative approach is that teachers should make sure to incorporate activities that use the target language as a means for meaningful communication in the classroom. When communication is stressed in the EFL classroom, students lose the speaking fright faster, reduce affective filters and are able to share their ideas more freely due to the openness and security of the learning environment. Teachers who stress communication in the classroom continually ask questions that appeal to students' interest,listen and validate their answers, and motivate for more conversation to happen. It is quite apparent that such exchanges come accompanied by on-the-spot corrections when a slip occurs, but the focus is still communication.

On the other hand, collaboration develops community. Learning environ-ments should rather be seen as communities where students can share and be themselves regardless of their preferences and language proficiency levels. Contrastingly, decorating classrooms (40%) and making students reflect on English and its importance (42.5%) show little relevance on motivating students to speak English in the classroom. Students seem to pay little attention to the environment decoration. One way in which this can be made beneficial to the learner

might be providing posters and visual cues of common words or phrases students will more likely say during class.

By providing both communication and collaboration activities, we construct a learning environment that motivates students to speak in the target language. This action continually helps students gain independence, and creates community in the classroom where learners help other learners. Through the survey result analysis, it was significant to see how positively students reacted to the use of games in the class (75%) and the use of speaking activities (fluency activities) in the classroom (75%); the latter is an example of how important community building is in the class. Kent and Simpson (2012, as cited in Lloyd, Kolodziej, and Brashears, 2016) advocate for classroom discourse as a mean for classroom community by asserting that "allowing students time to discuss, analyze, and reflect on the reading in small groups or pairs..is a great way to facilitate community" (p. 30)

As far as methodological strategies, based on students' feedback and reflecting upon current educational and second language acquisition theories, the following instructional ideas are suggested: Learning contracts with students; provide more precise instructions and widely use Comprehension Checking Questions (CCQs); and, work with vocabulary building activities. Further, LaVan (2001) also provides different activities to encourage L2 use in the classroom. These activities include:

- Songs (culture, grammar, vernacular use, artistic styles).
- Dance (culture, movement).
- Puppet plays (students can be given a topic or theme, then write and perform a play; an excellent area for incorporating specific language objectives).
- Linguistic games (bingo, jeopardy, etc.).
- Dialogues (again, easy to incorporate language objectives).
- Role plays (can be designed around daily activities and vocabulary).
- Simulations.
- Picture dictionaries (create a list of vernacular terms the students would like to learn, or synonyms that portray different meanings in different countries).
- Video performances (news reports, weather reports, current issues).
- How-to presentations (write instructions for performing a task and present to class; a great way to incorporate the imperative tense).

In classrooms where the L1 is not encouraged, teachers ought to find ways to engage students in total use of the target language. The aforementioned activities allow language instructors to have readily available resources that foster the L2 use in the classroom. Additionally, it provides students with a wide range of options using the target language, that may result in decline of the first language in the classroom. All in all, teachers need to be critically informed in order to make an effective integration of total immersion approaches to teaching.

## Conclusion

Literature suggests that English-only policies may not be conducive to second language acquisition, as it was perceived in the past. However, in environments when

said policies are institutionally enforced, problems arise as teachers have to deal with inconsistencies regarding student´s compliance with these policies and the language learning process. Studying teachers' and students' perceptions of strict English-only policies and L1 use directly informs teaching. This research concluded that students use their L1 due to many factors present in the teaching-learning process and that teacher-provided strategies can help decrease it. Additionally, the reasons behind students' use of Spanish as their L1 ranges from personal preference to linguistic impairment. Thus, teachers should be prepared to provide learners with balanced input and tasks which enable the learners to engage in meaningful learning paying attention to the students' background knowledge.

The students' reality and characteristics should always inform English-only policies. Many of the students need actual communication and will rely on whichever means they find feasible at their disposal, whether it is English or Spanish. Furthermore, since different bodies of research exist, both supporting and attacking L1 use, little consensus has been achieved on the ever-expanding debate of the first language use in the target language classroom. Teachers should become mediators in this issue; byy fostering an atmosphere where the L2 is readily available to students and motivation is constantly provided, teachers can boost the students' target language use. Conversely, teachers should be able to categorize and prioritize scenarios where the students' native language can be used, if it serves an ultimate instructional purpose. Furthermore, strategies that explicitly require students to use the L2 as a means to satisfy a communicative need, seem to prove helpful when trying to decrease the use of L1 in the classroom. Despite the tendency in English-only policies to assume that L2 total use is conducive to language learning, an opposing body of research suggests otherwise. Second language acquisition research has found both positive and negative effects of L1 use in the language classroom which should critically inform language teaching. Lastly, English-only policies may fail to acknowledge the fact that students do draw upon their first language in different scenarios, as it is part of human nature to exchange information with our peers. Language learning can be widely benefited by teachers who mediate L1 use in the classroom and English-only policies enforced by institutions as a remedial device to foster L2 communication in their programs.

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