

## Chapter V

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study aimed to research the purposes for which the mother tongue is used in the EFL classroom, as well as the attitudes and beliefs that EFL coordinators, teachers, and students have about such use. By analyzing the data from 44 elementary and 55 advanced EFL students, 6 EFL teachers and 4 EFL coordinators gathered through qualitative and quantitative instruments at three major universities in the city of Puebla, Mexico, this chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the results obtained.

As stated in Chapter I, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes and beliefs of EFL learners, teachers, and coordinators towards the use of the MT (i.e. Spanish) in the EFL classroom?
2. For what purposes do EFL teachers use the MT in the EFL classroom (i.e. giving instructions, teaching grammar, providing vocabulary translation, setting up pair/group work, classroom management)?
3. For what purposes do EFL learners use the MT in the EFL classroom (i.e. addressing the teacher, addressing their peers, asking for clarification, asking for word meaning)?

In addition, the possible expected outcomes of this research were the following:

1. EFL teachers and coordinators are expected to have negative attitudes and beliefs towards the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom due to the influence of the ongoing EFL methodologies being used, mainly the Direct Method.

2. EFL learners' attitudes and beliefs about the inclusion of the MT in the EFL classroom may be less negative than those of coordinators and teachers, especially at beginner levels where the MT may help learners clarify instructions, grammar topics, etc., as well as reduce anxiety feelings.
3. As previously stated, EFL teachers are expected to use the MT in the classroom for specific situations (i.e. giving instructions, explaining grammar, providing vocabulary translation (especially for abstract lexical items), classroom management, and setting up pair/group work, among others).
4. In addition, EFL learners are also expected to use the MT for specific purposes (i.e. addressing the teacher, addressing their peers, asking for clarification, asking for word meaning, and organizing pair/group work, among others).
5. It is expected that patterns will be found among EFL coordinators, teachers, and learners' attitudes, beliefs, and use of the MT in the EFL classroom at the three participant institutions.
6. Finally, it is expected that the findings of this research will be similar to those from previous research on the topic.

The following sections will provide the answers to the research questions above stated, making constant reference to the expected outcomes. In addition, the pedagogical implications of this research, its limitations, and directions for further research will be discussed.

### **5.1 Attitudes and Beliefs from the EFL Participants**

As seen in Tables 3 to 6 of Chapter IV, there were no significant differences of student responses between levels or among the participant institutions, giving place to generalizations and reinforcing the validity and reliability of this study. The

only exception was a difference of 0.0208 between the advanced levels of universities 1 and 2, considered significant since  $P < 0.05$  (see Table 5).

This can be due to the fact that the advanced group of University 2 had the highest level of proficiency of all the observed groups and its teacher, although a non-native speaker, lived in the United States for many years and, according to the observed class and the answers from his interview, was the most reluctant to use the MT in the EFL classroom. On the contrary, the group of University 1 had a low level of proficiency in spite of being at the “advanced” level and, because in the class observation their teacher used the L2 most of the class (see Appendix H), students were not encouraged by any means to use the target language; that is, they were allowed to refer to both the teacher and their peers in the L1 the entire class.

Similarly, although being at the same university, there was a difference of 0.0062 between the elementary and advanced levels at University 2, considered very significant since  $P < 0.01$  (see Table 6). This can be explained by the above mentioned characteristics of the advanced group, as well as by the difference in both groups’ proficiency level. In addition, let us remember that, even in the case that students take one EFL course after the other, there is a difference of four four-term courses between one level and the other. Therefore, it is understandable that the opinions of the advanced level students at University 2 differed from their elementary counterpart.

The fact that the results of the student’s questionnaire shown in the previous chapter do not differ significantly from one another reinforces expected outcome 5 since patterns were found among the participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and use of the MT in the EFL classroom that enable to answer research question 1.

In what refers to the attitudes and beliefs of EFL learners, teachers, and coordinators towards the use of the MT (i.e. Spanish) in the EFL classroom, the information provided in the interviews showed that the participant teachers and coordinators agreed the MT is necessary at beginner levels, although they all commented that such use should be restricted, limited only to specific purposes, and reduced at the same pace that students achieve a higher proficiency level (see question 9 in Appendix F and question 18 in Appendix G), reinforcing expected outcomes 1 and 2.

Although not statistically significant, it is noteworthy there was a difference in opinions between the elementary and advanced level learners in what refers to the use of the MT in the EFL classroom. As expected, beginner students are more in favor of such use while advanced learners tend to reject it more. This situation is understandable and, actually, ideal, since learners are precisely expected to reduce the use of the MT as they advance in their L2 learning process.

Similarly, teachers at elementary levels had a more positive tendency towards the use of the MT in the EFL classroom, while EFL teachers at the advanced levels, including coordinators, tended to diminish its importance. Finally, it is important to highlight that there is an observable correlation between how the participant teachers learnt the L2, or an L3 if applicable, and their teaching ideologies (see question 4 in Appendix F). Further research on this may provide important contributions on the topic.

## **5.2 Purposes for EFL Teachers and Learners' Use of MT in the L2 Classroom**

Similar to other previous research (Kharma and Hajjaj's, 1989; Tang, 2002) in all the classes observed, both the teacher and the students used the mother tongue for different purposes. Moreover, some of these purposes were present in the

majority if not in all the groups. In addition, judging by the diverse uses given to the MT and the amount of times it was used for that purpose (see Appendixes I and J), it is also clear that the elementary level groups used the MT much more than the advanced groups, reinforcing possible outcomes 1 and 2.

A summary of the uses given to the MT by the students in the six groups observed is ordered from the most to the least repeated use in Appendix I. Similarly, Appendix J shows how many of the participant teachers used the MT in the EFL classroom for specific purposes, and the number of times the L1 was used for that purpose according to the observations.

In what refers to research questions 2 and 3, the results show that pair/group work, addressing peers, and addressing the teachers were the main purposes for which the participant students used the MT in the classroom, while providing meaning and establishing rapport were the most common uses for the participant teachers. These results confirm expected outcomes 3 and 4. It can also be seen that many of the uses given to the MT in this study are congruent with those of previous research in the area, reinforcing expected outcome 6. Appendix K shows how the results of this study are similar to some of the authors cited in Chapter II.

### **5.3 Pedagogical Implications**

From the results obtained and their consistency with previous findings in the field, it can be concluded that the MT is definitely used in the EFL classroom by the participants involved in the teaching-learning process, that is, the teacher and the students. Such use of the MT undoubtedly depends on the proficiency level of the learners, implying that the more basic it is, the more use of the MT and vice versa. Furthermore, as indicated, a pattern was found on the situations for which the MT is

used by the participant EFL students and teachers of this study that is also consistent with the findings of previous research.

However, there were cases in which the researcher noticed there was an overuse of the L1, particularly, and as the data from the class observations shows, when the learners addressed their peers and teachers. This means that it is in the production of the language, more specifically in the speaking skill, that the students tend to overuse the MT. There seems to be an agreement between teachers and learners that this tendency is social in nature since most learners use the MT because their peers do. In addition, they use the L1 to talk to each other due to insecurities in their performance in the L2, fearing they will be criticized either for not speaking “correctly” or, on the contrary, for doing it very well, leading their peers to consider them “presumptuous”.

As a possible solution to this problem, it is the researcher’s opinion that there should be a stronger motivation from both, teacher and peers, for a student to feel comfortable with his/her performance when speaking in the L2. This motivation could be either intrinsic, by telling students since the beginning of their L2 education how important it is to start using the L2 and that it is part of their learning process to make mistakes, or extrinsic, by assigning a grade or giving awards or extra points to learners each time they participate in the L2, independently of whether they make any mistakes.

However, it is important to reinforce that the means used for increasing the students’ motivation should always be positive; that is, penalization for using the MT in the EFL classroom should be avoided since it does not promote motivation in the students but, on the contrary, it may considerably affect their affective factor towards the L2. Moreover, it is the researcher’s opinion based on her experience as an EFL

teacher that forbidding the use of the MT in the EFL classroom through penalization or other negative strategies not only does not make students use the L2 but alienates them by taking away their most reliable means of communication.

Recasting and other tools for error correction while a student is speaking are advisable as long as the learner does not feel exposed or embarrassed, and all kinds of peer judgements should be avoided since the beginning. In order to avoid peers' negative criticism, each student could be assigned a "speaking peer" who will be constantly giving feedback on his/her pronunciation, grammar use, word choice, fluency, and other aspects related to the speaking skill. Pairing students with a higher proficiency level with those whose level is a bit lower could be a good idea to improve the latter's skill. Once again, students should be encouraged to speak in the L2 but never forced, and they should feel free to use the MT when necessary, that is, when they do not know how to express what they want to say in the L2 or when they start feeling frustrated for not achieving a successful communication.

Meta-cognitive skills in general (i.e. goal setting, monitoring, and evaluation) are also a useful tool for improving learners' confidence in using the target language. Students could be encouraged to tape-record themselves during a class and analyze their weaknesses so that they can work on them. This can also help them to be conscious of how much they use the target language and how much the MT, so that they make a bigger effort to use the L2. The teacher should also keep a record of each student's participation in the L2 and give them continuous feedback on what their weak points are.

In addition, increasing the students' vocabulary is fundamental for them to feel more confident in producing the L2. Giving them basic expressions or what is referred to as "chunks" of language (i.e. how do you say...?) since the beginning of

their L2 education and encouraging them to use such classroom vocabulary is a good strategy. Similarly, students should be taught how to use the dictionary effectively, so that they can move on from a bilingual to a monolingual dictionary as soon as their level allows them.

Another means for increasing learners' confidence in speaking in the L2 could be producing a piece of writing first that, after being corrected by a peer or by the teacher, they can read aloud. In this way, they can be sure they will not have any grammar mistakes which will allow them to concentrate only on their pronunciation and fluency, which will be easier with the help of a correct punctuation. All in all, teachers should focus more on the speaking skill and design activities that encourage students to use the L2 since the beginning of the course such as oral presentations, debates, and others that help students lose their fear of actually using the target language.

It is a big responsibility for the teacher to keep control of the use of the MT in the EFL classroom since there is always a risk of overusing it. In the researcher's opinion, the teacher should use the MT whenever s/he feels there is a lack of understanding in the students and should allow them to use it if, as previously stated, they cannot express themselves in the target language. However, it is advisable that both teacher and students make an effort to communicate first in the L2 and then switch to the MT if necessary.

This does not mean, as many authors and teachers suggest, that the MT should be used only as "the last resource" because this would imply that other strategies that have been proven unsuccessful, such as mimics, drawings, flashcards, etc., would be used before recurring to the MT, affecting the rhythm of the class, wasting time, and frustrating both teacher and students by not achieving their



goal. The MT should be seen as a shortcut when the L2 is ineffective for the purposes of successful communication and comprehension.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

The main limitation of this study was the amount of participants it consisted of since, as explained, only 99 EFL students provided data from three universities whose amount of EFL students is considerably large; therefore, the sample size used for this research is not representative enough as for making bigger generalizations than the ones already presented. In addition, not all the groups were distributed in the same way; having the same amount of participant students in each observed group would have been better for the purposes of comparisons between levels and among institutions. Another limitation was that, although piloted, the instruments used for data collection were designed and administered by the researcher, compromising complete objectivity to a certain extent. Finally, although the data collection process was carried out in the most similar way in all the institutions, only one observation of each group was done. It is the researcher's opinion that at least two observations should have been done in order to ensure that the participants' behaviour was consistent and not influenced by external factors such as the participants' mood, the schedule, the topic of the class, or other.

#### **5.5 Further Research**

Replication of this research with a larger sample would be important in order to claim further validity and reliability of the results obtained, as well as to provide more generalizable results. Changing the variables such as the ongoing semester, amount and schedule of the observed classes, and amount of participants would also serve this purpose. In addition, an expansion to other institutions that share similar characteristics with the participants of this study would strengthen the current

findings, especially if such expansion includes the major universities within the city, state, or area. Even more, similar research on groups that have native speaker teachers would be an important point of comparison for this study.

In Chapter I, it was stated that, besides providing a guideline for EFL teachers about the “effective” uses that can be given to the MT in the L2 classroom, this study aimed to support the creation of materials that included the mother tongue as a tool for EFL teaching. Appendixes L to W are examples of SFL and EFL materials that already include activities, instructions, vocabulary, culture explanations, and teaching tips in the L1.

Appendixes L to S are taken from the book *¡Arriba!* (Zayas-Bazán and Bacon, 2004) used to teach Spanish to beginner English-speaking students. Appendixes L to Q are from the annotated instructor’s edition and Appendixes R and S are from the student’s workbook. Appendix L shows that the teaching tips and activity suggestions are given to the teacher in the MT (English). Similarly, unknown vocabulary is given to the students through direct translation as footnotes or in lists (Appendix M) and instructions (Appendix N) and culture explanations (Appendix O) are also given to the learners in the MT. This occurs until Chapter 5 (out of 15), where instructions and culture explanations are already given in the L2 (Spanish) (see Appendixes P and Q), but vocabulary lists still have direct translation from the L2 to the MT. Furthermore, the instructions in the student’s workbook from Chapters 1 to 15 are all in the MT (Appendixes R and S). This book is meant to be used during three periods of four months each at university level so that, by the time they finish it, students have a lower-intermediate level of Spanish.

In the case of textbooks used in Mexico for EFL teaching, Appendixes T and U show workbook activities from the series *Can Do* (Downie, Gray, and Jiménez,

2006) used with junior-high school students at four different levels. Each level is worked in a school year, preparing students to finish level four with an equivalent level to the basics of the common European framework. The practice book of each level consists of 14 units and from level 1 (Appendix T) to level 4 (Appendix U) each unit contains a “language biography” activity where learners have to translate words and expressions from the L2 (English) to the MT (Spanish).

Finally, the series *Catch* (Zannata, 2004) used to teach English to Spanish-speaking students, in its six levels for elementary school children, designed a teacher’s edition where instructions and activity suggestions are given to the teacher in Spanish (see Appendixes V and W).

These are some examples of textbooks that make use of the learners’ mother tongue to teach the L2 and, although open to discussion, it is the researcher’s opinion that further research should be performed on the effectiveness of such materials in order to develop more and expand to the creation of other such as flashcards, board games, and classroom activities that include the learners’ MT once, and as stated from the beginning of this study, the mother tongue is granted its place as an already available, natural, and effective resource for English language teaching.