

Target language or the first language? Employing first language in teaching grammar for undergraduates in a second language classroom

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The impact of first language instruction in second language teaching and learning is a debatable area of research in which different scholars hold different views on the pedagogical usage of first language instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. In most ESL classrooms in Sri Lanka, teachers tend to follow an only English policy, where they deliver the lesson in English, especially grammar while aggravating the difficulty in comprehension. Additionally, students encounter a dilemma in using L1 in ESL classrooms in the higher education sector due to the absence of a solid conception of the medium of communication. Hence, this research is focused on the impact of first language instruction in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms. It is expected to examine the effectiveness of using L1 instruction in the ESL classroom to teach grammar and the perception of students regarding their preferred language of instruction. A mixed method was adopted to achieve the research objectives of the study. A purposive sample consisting of 60 first-year intermediate-level learners at the Faculty of Management and Finance of the University of Ruhuna was selected. These learners studied in the English Language Intensive Course (ELIC) conducted in their first academic year to cover all four language skills. Moreover, the students in the sample ranged from ages 21 to 23 and their First Language (L1) was Sinhala. Among them, 30 students were randomly assigned to the experimental group while the other 30 participants were allotted to the controlled group. To examine the impact of L1 in teaching grammar in an ESL classroom, the lessons on perfect tenses were prepared by the researchers. A pre-test was conducted with both groups at the beginning of the research to measure their existing knowledge of perfect tenses. Subsequently, the experimental group was given grammar instruction using both English and Sinhala languages whereas the controlled group was taught using only English. The grammar lessons were conducted for two weeks within 16 hours allocating 8 hours per group. Later, the same grammar test given at the beginning was administered to both groups as the post-test to measure the impact of using L1 instruction in the ESL classroom. Additionally, a Google form questionnaire including 5 open-ended questions was distributed to collect the perception on employing L1 in ESL classrooms. Subsequently, the data analysis methods include Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that the students of the experimental group who were exposed to both English and Sinhala instruction have made a significant improvement in their post-test results rather than the students in the controlled group. Moreover, the perspectives of students affirmed that the use of the first language by the teachers in the ESL classroom creates a non-threatening learning environment where they are able to grasp the language easily while the adherence to only English policy by teachers generates more complexities in comprehension. Therefore, this research suggests that using L1 instruction in ESL classrooms can be effective in fostering a second language.

Keywords: ESL, First language instruction, Grammar, Second language learning, Students' perspective

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