

Learning Mandarin Chinese as a Foreign Language in a Bilingual Context: Adult Learners' Perceptions of the Use of L1 Maltese and L2 English in Mandarin Chinese Lessons in Malta

Christiana Gauci-Sciberras

Abstract—The first language (L1) could be used in foreign language teaching and learning as a pedagogical tool to scaffold new knowledge in the target language (TL) upon linguistic knowledge that the learner already has. In a bilingual context, code-switching between the two languages usually occurs in classrooms. One of the reasons for code-switching is because both languages are used for scaffolding new knowledge. This research paper aims to find out why both the L1 (Maltese) and the L2 (English) are used in the classroom of Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in the bilingual context of Malta. This research paper also aims to find out the learners' perceptions of the use of a bilingual medium of instruction. Two research methods were used to collect qualitative data; semi-structured interviews with adult learners of Mandarin Chinese and lesson observations. These two research methods were used so that the data collected in the interviews would be triangulated with data collected in lesson observations. The L1 (Maltese) is the language of instruction mostly used. The teacher and the learners switch to the L2 (English) or to any other foreign language according to the need at a particular instance during the lesson.

Keywords—Chinese, bilingual, pedagogical purpose of L1 and L2, CFL acquisition.

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS research paper is set in Malta; a bilingual country in Maltese and English. The aim of this research paper is to find out how both Maltese (L1) and English (L2) have a pedagogical purpose in the CFL classroom in Malta.

The data for this research paper were collected from the classroom of CFL at the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability at the Ministry for Education and Employment (Malta).

II. THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE (FL) TEACHING

The effects of the L1 on the acquisition of a foreign language in a multilingual context has been the subject of several studies. It has been argued that the L1 is the point of reference of multilinguals or bilinguals who are in the process of learning a new foreign language. Learners tend to first base new linguistic knowledge on the L1 system and then adjust as more knowledge in the TL is acquired. A number of

researchers argue that Non-Native Speaker (NNS) teachers' greatest advantage is that they share the L1 with the learners and so they conduct lessons in a way that the learners understand as teacher and learners depart from a common shared cultural and linguistic background [1], [2], [4]-[6], [9], [11]-[14], [26], [27], [31], [32]. Reference [15] shows that the L1 is very "beneficial as a cognitive tool that aids in L2 learning." The authors in [15] also advise foreign language teachers to alternate between the use of the L1 and the TL in order to make sure that on the one hand learners are being exposed to the TL while ensuring that they understand the content that is being taught. Many argue that access to the teacher's explanation in the L1 or in a mix of the L1 and the TL is more accessible to NNS learners than an explanation that is exclusively in the TL. In light of this argument, the NNS teacher's explanation in the L1 ensures that the learners understand the concept being explained [20]. Following a very clear explanation of the concept, the new grammatical structure is practiced or drilled in the TL. This argument does not necessarily hold for learners who are bilingual or multilingual; learners who are equally proficient in more than one language have more than one language to refer to while they are learning a new foreign language. Such a multilingual reality suggests that the teacher and learners might share several languages as background knowledge in addition to the TL. Such is the situation in the context of this research paper, all the learners and the teacher are Maltese nationals; their L1 is Maltese and L2 is English. In addition to the L1 and L2, the teacher and learners have varying degrees of knowledge in other foreign languages that they have learned either through schooling, through the media and travel. The learners and the teacher have different linguistic abilities in a few European languages that are commonly taught in Malta; namely Italian and French [29], [30]. A few learners have knowledge of other languages such as Arabic, German and Russian. Since Maltese is the shared L1 of all learners and of the teacher, they mostly communicate in Maltese, but similar to what happens in many classrooms in Malta, code-switching between the L1 (Maltese) and the L2 (English) occurs frequently and due to different reasons. In light of this situation, the aim of this research paper is to find out why both the L1 (Maltese) and the L2 (English) are used in the CFL classroom in Malta and what the learners' perceptions of the use of both languages is. The research methodology used to answer this research question is

Christiana Gauci-Sciberras is with the University of Southampton, United Kingdom (e-mail: sciberraschristiana@gmail.com).

qualitative; a number of adult learners of Mandarin Chinese at the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability at the Ministry for Education and Employment (Malta) were interviewed. To triangulate data, lessons were observed and reflected upon.

The multilingual socio-cultural context of the teacher and the learners implies that like what happens in real life, it is natural for code-switching to also occur in the classroom [1], [7], [15], [21], [28], [31], [32]. There are many reasons why teachers and learners code-switch in class; such an example is to utter asides and to communicate administrative information [3]. The L1 is very efficient to utter asides and to communicate administrative information as teachers ensure that all learners understand the information and that such utterances are not necessarily related to TL learning. In view of this, it is very clear to students that such utterances are not necessarily related to the content of the lesson and so are not left wondering what the utterance means when, in fact, it is not something that the learners should focus on. Learners also code-switch to utter asides, such as when asking the teacher to explain something or when they pass comments to compare and contrast the TL or a cultural aspect of the TL to their L1, L2 or other foreign languages they might know. Teachers and learners code-switch in order to translate words or concepts in their L1, L2 or other foreign languages that they know; this is a useful way for learners to learn vocabulary and meaning and even grammar structures or concepts. Similar to its use in the foreign language adults' classroom, translation is also a process and a useful tool used in bilingual or multilingual child language acquisition as it provides scaffolding to learning new linguistic structures or concepts. Translation of vocabulary is a very efficient scaffolding technique for other learners and for the teacher to confirm that the learners are understanding well. Several learners find scaffolding very useful when speaking the TL [1] especially when the teacher reformulates and translates learners' utterances to elicit utterances in the TL from other learners.

The L1 is also used in the FL classroom to give clear instructions on tasks the learners should do and to move collaborative tasks forward [31], [32]. This is essential to make sure that all learners understand and know what they should be doing to accomplish the task set by the teacher. Code-switching between the TL and any other language also occurs to continue the flow of communication or to hold the floor. Learners might use the TL to hold the floor as most probably the teacher will not stop a learner who is speaking in the TL, so learners might be switching to the TL in order to hold the floor during the lesson.

Despite the advantages of the teacher who shares the L1, L2 and other common foreign languages with the learners, [24] and [25] argue that a common framework that clearly explains when and how to use the L1 in FL classrooms as "a valuable tool" to aid language learning and when it is "an easy option" to resort to during lessons. In fact, [21] argues that the teacher should "seek to formalize the relationship between L1 and the target language" in order to make the use of the L1 really a valuable tool for learners to better understand the TL and to

create the multilingual norms that the learners will be exposed to out of the classroom.

Code-switching is a characteristic of bilingual or multilingual speakers as it is obvious that in order to code-switch, one must have a linguistic competence in more than one language. Multilingualism is a characteristic of the teacher and the learners who are the participants in this research paper as Mandarin Chinese is an additional foreign language that they are learning in adulthood. This implies that both the teacher and the learners are NNS of Mandarin Chinese; all the learners are adults and the teacher herself learned Mandarin Chinese during her early twenties. As NNS learners of Mandarin Chinese, whose linguistic and cultural identity is Maltese and European and who are learning Mandarin Chinese to add to their repertoire of foreign languages, one wonders whether such learners aspire to become native-like speakers of Mandarin Chinese. The issue of whether NNS learners and NNS teachers in today's multilingual and multicultural world ever aspire to be native-like has been discussed in several previous publications.

Authors [26], [27] conclude by saying that the ideal teacher should have good proficiency of the learners' L1 and near native proficiency of the TL. Scholars [26], [27], [19] also argue that in an ideal educational institution there should be a balance between NS and NNS teachers who complement each other and who achieve great results together. Authors [13], [14] argue that proficiency in the L2 or in a FL should not be described in terms of NS proficiency, but in the terms of an L2 or a FL speaker. This is because according to [16], [17] in the past, the NS was considered to be the standard that FL learners aimed to imitate, but this is no longer the case and the NS is no longer at the centre of FL teaching. As argued by [8], [33] EFL as the English language became more international and the demand for EFL teachers grew, NNS teachers worldwide have increased to supply such a great demand. Such a situation could be compared to the situation of CFL, as the demand for CFL teachers increases, so too will the number of NNS teachers increase. Another factor that might not have featured in past research projects is that the world is constantly changing, and that today's societies are different from those of the 1990s or of the early 2000s, so what was relevant to that era might not necessarily be relevant to today's society. This makes the quest to define what makes a 'native speaker' even more complex.

Reference [10] states that "Mandarin Chinese pedagogy is still in its infancy in the United States." and so it is still very premature to decide who is the best candidate to teach such a different language from what Western learners are used to. Reference [10] goes on to argue that "both of these teachers bring a different and unique set of skills to the profession." This is very much in line with the study conducted by author [23] who argues that a rotation system between NS and NNS teachers would benefit learners as they would be exposed to the benefits of both. In an ideal situation, a balance between NS and NNS teachers would be ideal, but according to [12] as much as "80% of English teachers worldwide are Non-Native English Speakers (NNES)." The cultural context of such

teachers is important to consider as a learner might feel very disappointed if s/he goes to the country where the TL is spoken as a native language by the majority of the population, but finds a NNS teacher in the classroom [22]. This follows the classification in [18], contexts where English is spoken as the Inner, the Outer and the Expanding circle are classified. The author [18] classifies countries where English is the majority language (such as the UK, the US, Canada, Australia) as countries to be in the inner circle. He classifies countries such as India in the outer circle; countries where English is taught and learned as a second language. Finally, [18] moves on to the expanding circle where he classifies countries such as Japan where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. Such a classification is very relevant to the present research project, as in Malta and in the European context, Mandarin Chinese is not widely taught and where it is taught, it is taught as an additional foreign language. This is true for the Maltese context; in the education system Maltese and English are taught as the primary languages of the education system, they are compulsory throughout all the years of schooling. Later in the educational system, learners are to choose a foreign language that is any one of French, Italian, Spanish or German. Mandarin Chinese is offered as a foreign language option in very few schools, at the University of Malta and at the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employment. Such a situation places Mandarin Chinese in the expanding circle in the socio-cultural and socio-linguistic context of Malta. Thus, this research is set in a context where Mandarin Chinese is still not widely taught but where the demand is increasing steadily. In such a context, where Mandarin Chinese is being taught in the expanding circle that is already very multilingual, issues of code-switching between the L1 (Maltese), the L2 (English) and other foreign languages (Arabic, French, Italian, German, Spanish) that the learners and the teacher share definitely come up.

The current research paper starts with the idea that code-switching between the L1, L2 and other foreign languages that the learners and the teacher share all feature in CFL classrooms of NNS teachers in Malta. Further to this idea, the aim of this research paper is to find out why the L1 (Maltese), the L2 (English) and other foreign languages are used in the classroom. Then the research paper moves on to find out what the learners' perceptions towards the use of the L1 (Maltese), the L2 (English) and other foreign languages are.

This research paper collects qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with learners of CFL who attended the course in Mandarin Chinese at the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (Ministry of Education and Employment, Malta) during academic year 2018/2019. During the interviews, participants were specifically asked about the bilingual medium of instruction and how they perceive the L1 (Maltese), the L2 (English) and other foreign languages that they already know, to scaffold learning of CFL. To triangulate the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, lessons were observed and reflected upon with a particular focus on the use of the L1 (Maltese), L2 (English) and other foreign languages and how the languages in the

repertoire of the learners and teacher contributed to scaffold new knowledge in the TL. A total of ten learners attended the course in Mandarin Chinese at the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability during academic year 2018/2019 and they all agreed to participate in the research.

III. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Throughout the data collection process, several factors why the teacher and the learners code-switch to the L1 (Maltese) or to the L2 (English) were identified. As Maltese is the L1 of all the learners and of the teacher, most asides were uttered in the L1. Asides in the L1 (Maltese) such as “mela” (so), “ejja” (come on) were uttered by the learners continuously for a number of reasons; mostly to confirm understanding and to encourage each other to speak in the TL. Such words were also uttered by the teacher to elicit utterances in the TL. Both the L1 (Maltese) and the L2 (English) are used to translate vocabulary by the teacher and by the learners to ensure correct understanding. Translating vocabulary in the L1 or in the L2 is very affective and it saves time as the teacher translates rather than explains or describes what an object is.

The L1 (Maltese) is also mostly used as the medium of instruction for grammar structures and as a way through which to scaffold new grammatical or linguistic knowledge. Such an example is when the teacher introduced the grammatical category of the Measure Word; a quantifier system in Mandarin Chinese. The teacher scaffolded the new knowledge of the Measure Word by comparing and contrasting Mandarin Chinese to the L1 (Maltese) and to the L2 (English). The explanation started off by making it clear that the morpheme /s/ in the L2 (English) to make a noun plural does not exist in Mandarin Chinese, but a quantifier system similar to a structure in the L1 (and even to a certain extent in the L2) is used. The teacher wrote the basic structure 一个人 (yi ge ren) (one, measure word for general nouns, person) and compared this to the phrases “erba’ xkejjer patata” (four, sacks, potatoes) “żewġ tazzi tè” (two, cups, tea) in the L1 (Maltese). By scaffolding and by comparing and contrasting the structure in the TL to the structure in the L1, the teacher ensures that the learners understand very clearly what the new structure in the TL is.

The L1 is an indispensable tool through which the teacher explains cultural and linguistic concepts. An example of this is when the teacher teaches common expressions in the TL such as ‘thank you’ and ‘you’re welcome’. The teacher starts off by translating the TL 谢谢 (xie xie) (thanks) in both the L1 and the L2. The teacher scaffolds the reply to 谢谢 (xie xie) by comparing to a similar sequence in the L1. The teacher states 不客气 (bu ke qi) (you’re welcome) as an appropriate reply to 谢谢 (xie xie) and the teacher immediately knows that this will raise questions as the sequence starts with the negative 不 (bu, not). The teacher scaffolds this on the L1 sequence “m’hemmx imniex” (you’re welcome) which similar to the utterance in Mandarin Chinese, also starts with the negative. Scaffolding knowledge in the TL on what learners are already familiar with makes the L1 and the L2 indispensable tools

through which to introduce new concepts that might not always be so new after all.

Other foreign languages that the learners have previously learned also have a pedagogical purpose. Such an example is when learners say that unlike other languages that they learned previously, Mandarin Chinese has no case endings, no verb conjugation and no alphabet. Such contrasts with other foreign languages that the learners have learned previously have an important pedagogical purpose as through them the learners understand the differences between Mandarin Chinese and other languages that they learned and so better understand TL structures and concepts.

In the context where the data were collected, the L1 (Maltese) is also the language generally used for communication with school staff, administration and among learners. Even though written communication from the school administration to learners and teachers is written in both the L1 (Maltese) and L2 (English), most spoken communication at school tends to be in the L1 (Maltese). This is also reflected in the lessons of Mandarin Chinese, during which the main language of instruction is the L1 (Maltese) as the teacher and learners agree that it is the most efficient language in their repertoire through which to explain TL concepts. Despite this, the textbook used in the classroom is in the L2 (English). This is because of the lack of a textbook in the L1 (Maltese), and in fact, the teacher constantly gives more accurate translations from the TL to the L1 (Maltese) in order to bypass the L2 (English) translations that are confusing at times. The use of mostly L1 (Maltese) language of instruction is possible because all the learners in this particular classroom are all speakers of Maltese. The situation would have been very different if the participants of the course were not all speakers of Maltese.

IV. CONCLUSION

The above data from lesson observations show that the languages in the repertoire of the teacher and the learners come into play during CFL lessons. The L1 (Maltese) is the language of instruction mostly used, but the teacher and learners switch to the L2 (English) or to any other foreign language that they know according to the need; as typical of multilingual speakers in different contexts, the teacher and learners code-switch according to what is most efficient at that instance. If a structure in the L1 (Maltese) is closer to the structure in the TL, then the L1 (Maltese) is used to scaffold new knowledge at that point. If the L2 (English) is more efficient to scaffold a structure in the TL, then the L2 (English) is used. If another foreign language is the most efficient to scaffold the point, then that is used. This shows that multilingual FL teachers and learners code-switch to whatever language works best to make the point in that particular instance.

The fact that the teacher and the learners in this particular classroom share the L1 (Maltese), the L2 (English) and a number of other foreign languages is definitely of a great advantage as teacher and learners switch to whatever language of instruction is the most efficient at the particular instance.

This is also in line with argument in [26] that “the more proficient in the learners’ mother tongue, the more efficient in the classroom.” This is because the teacher literally speaks the language(s) of the learners; the teacher understands exactly where the learners are coming from and acts as a bridge from where the learners are, towards the TL and its culture. The learners’ perceptions of the use of the L1 (Maltese), L2 (English) and other foreign languages are very positive; all the learners who participated in the study have agreed that the L1 (Maltese) has a very important pedagogical purpose and it is vital in their classroom. This is because in certain instances Maltese is typologically close to the TL, so it is the most efficient language of instruction to scaffold TL structures in the socio-linguistic context of Malta. The learners also argued that when they listen to an explanation in the L1 (Maltese) or when they read notes written by their teacher in the L1 (Maltese) they feel they can understand and relate better to the TL because the explanation in the L1 (Maltese) is closer to them. The participants also argued that explanations and books whose medium of instruction is the L2 (English) is more complex to absorb, this is because the L2 (English) is most of the times a barrier between the learners and the TL.

All in all, the code-switching that occurred in the classroom under study reflects what happens in typical multilingual contexts; interlocutors code-switch to which ever language is the most efficient to communicate at that instance. Generally, the L1 (Maltese) is the language of instruction of the classroom under study as teacher and learners feel that the TL is typologically closer to the L1 (Maltese). Due to this, the teacher continuously translated the L2 (English) in the textbook to the L1 (Maltese) and provided notes whose medium of instruction is the L1 (Maltese). In the light of this, the researcher suggests that in future, typological research on Maltese (L1) and of Mandarin Chinese (TL) would be vital to further develop the teaching of CFL in Malta. In addition to this, more research in the field of CFL in Malta and especially the creation of textbooks whose language of instruction is the L1 (Maltese) would be vital to further develop the teaching and learning of CFL in Malta, the demand of which is continuously increasing.

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