

An Investigation into Own Language Use in ELT in the Context of Myanmar

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Abstract

The present research explores the extent to which how and why teacher employ learners' own language in English Language classrooms. A 60-item questionnaire by Hall and Cook (2013) is employed in this research. The survey is administered to 36 English teachers from 7 universities. The results provide clear evidence of widespread own-language use within ELT, and teachers' attitudes towards own-language use, and their classroom practices. It is reported that having the frequent use of the learners' own language is especially to develop rapport and a good classroom, and explain grammar while the less use is to test and assess learners. The learners' use of their own language, preparing for tasks and activities before switching it to English, and doing spoken translation activities are the most frequent activities though watching English Language TV/Video with own language subtitles is the least. Though half of the respondents agree that English should be the main language in the classroom, and feeling guilty if other languages are used instead of English in the classroom, just one-third of teachers try to exclude using students' own language. It is also suggested that teachers' attitude towards own-language use and their classroom practices are more complex than they are often acknowledged.

Keywords: Own Language, Teachers, ELT classroom

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, the deploy of learners' own languages was banned by ELT theorists and methodologists (Hall and Cook, 2012), for the assumption a new language should be taught and learned monolingually, without reference to or use of the learners' own language in the classroom.

With the reason of focusing wholly on accuracy and writing, ignoring on fluency and speaking, and being teacher-dominated process, there had been a rejection to the grammar translation method in the late of 19th century. Subsequently, ELT methodologists supported monolingual (Widdowson, 2003) or intra-lingual teaching (Stern, 1992), based around the principle that only the target language should be used in the ELT classroom. Monolingual approaches become one of the parts of the major current approaches as communicative language teaching, task-based learning and teaching, and content and language integrated learning.

Meanwhile, Kim and Elder (2008) identify a similar distinction, additionally suggesting that the learners' own language is often used for the social goal of expressing personal concern and sympathy. Similarly, a number of studies highlight the role of own-language use in potentially establishing more equitable intra-class relationships between the teacher and learners than via the exclusive use of the target language (Brooks- Lewis, 2009). Indeed, Edstrom (2006) proposes that debates surrounding own-language use go beyond concerns about language learning processes or classroom management and involve value-based judgments in which teachers have a moral obligation to use the learners'

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own language judiciously in order to recognise learners as individuals, to communicate respect and concern, and to create a positive affective environment for learning.

It is clear that the attitudes of teachers and learners towards own language's legitimacy and value in the ELT classroom decide the extent to which own-language use occurs in a class. Many studies report a sense of guilt among teachers when learners' own languages are used in class (Littlewood and Yu, 2011).

Although learners' attitudes will clearly affect the extent and role of own-language use in the classroom, there has been less research into learner perceptions of the issue. That said, a number of studies have uncovered positive attitudes, particularly as a way of reducing learners' anxiety and creating a humanistic classroom (Littlewood and Yu, 2011). Use of the learners' own language has been found to be prevalent within ELT classrooms, even in contexts where it is ostensibly discouraged (Kim and Elder, 2008).

The prevalence of English-only monolingual teaching without the use of the students' own language is ascribed to the principle of English is best taught assumed from 20th century debate, research, and professional discussion within ELT. However, there has been increasingly controversial on this monolingual assumption in these years, and this leads to the beginning of re-evaluating of teaching which relates to the language being taught in classrooms around the world. In spite of having this interest, there is very little data that documents the extent and purpose of own-language use in English language teaching especially in Myanmar. Therefore, this research aimed to address this gap, while also providing a useful resource for teachers who see a place for the learners' own language in their own teaching. The study therefore investigated the use of learners' own languages within ELT in the context of Myanmar and the perceptions and perspectives of own-language use held by English language teachers.

Aim and Objectives

This research aimed to explore the extent to which, how, and why teachers employ learners' own language in English Language classroom in Myanmar. The objectives are to investigate the ways in which learners' own languages are used in English-language teaching, to explore teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards the use of learners' own languages in the ELT classroom, and to investigate the factors that influence teachers' reported practices and attitudes.

Research questions

1. How do teachers report about types of own-language use activities that they and learners engage in?
2. How do teachers' reported attitudes towards and beliefs about own-language use in the ELT classroom vary?
3. How do teachers' perceptions of their institutional culture, and the culture/discourse of ELT more broadly, in relation to own-language use?

Materials and Method

Participants

The respondents consisted of 36 English teachers from Mandalay University of Foreign Languages, Monywa University, Mandalay University of

Distance Education, Haka College, Sagaing University of Education, Yadanabon University, and Meiktila University.

Instruments

In this research, a 60-item questionnaire by Hall and Cook (2013) is used as a medium to obtain the required data. The key issues investigated with teachers included: how and to what extent teachers used the learners' own language in their teaching, how and to what extent learners used their own language in class, teachers' attitudes towards own-language use in class, teachers' evaluation of the arguments for and against own-language use in ELT, teachers' perceptions of general attitudes towards own-language use in their schools/institutions and within the profession of ELT more generally. Additionally, relevant biographic data including an understanding of the participants' professional contexts (their working university, typical number of learners per class, whether classes were monolingual – with learners sharing an own language, or multilingual – with learners coming from different own language backgrounds), and their professional experience are also added.

Consequently, the questionnaire consisted of a range of closed items and a number of open-ended questions. Closed questions took the form of Likert-scale items; open-ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to add written qualitative comments to the quantitative survey data, for example, to develop their views or to provide further examples of how the learners' own language was used in their classroom. The average time, for completion of the survey was 25–30 minutes.

Data Collection and Analysis

A convenience sampling technique was used to collect the required data. The survey was administered electronically through the online Google drive from December, 2017 to January 2018. Questionnaires were distributed via links to 54 university English teachers. A total of 36 teachers from 7 universities respond to the survey. The response rate is (66.6) percent. The closed survey data was analysed via Google form to obtain Descriptive statistics (e.g. percentage, distributions, and frequencies).

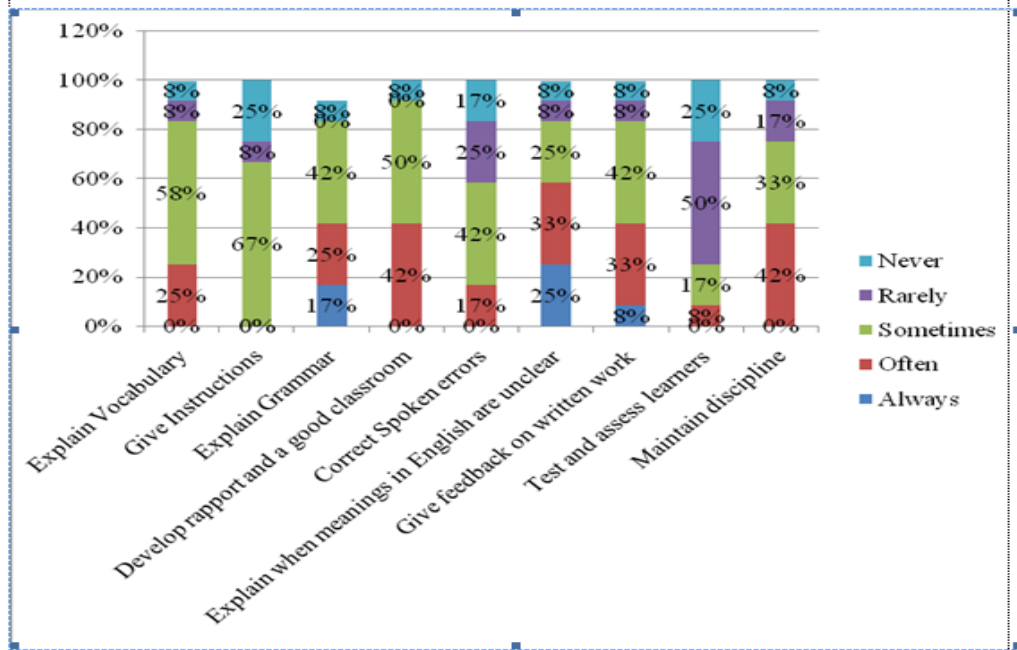
Findings and Discussion

Item (1) to (9) of the questionnaire explored the biographic data including an understanding of the participants' professional contexts (their working university, typical number of learners per class, whether classes were monolingual – with learners sharing an own language, or multilingual – with learners coming from different own language backgrounds), and their professional experience

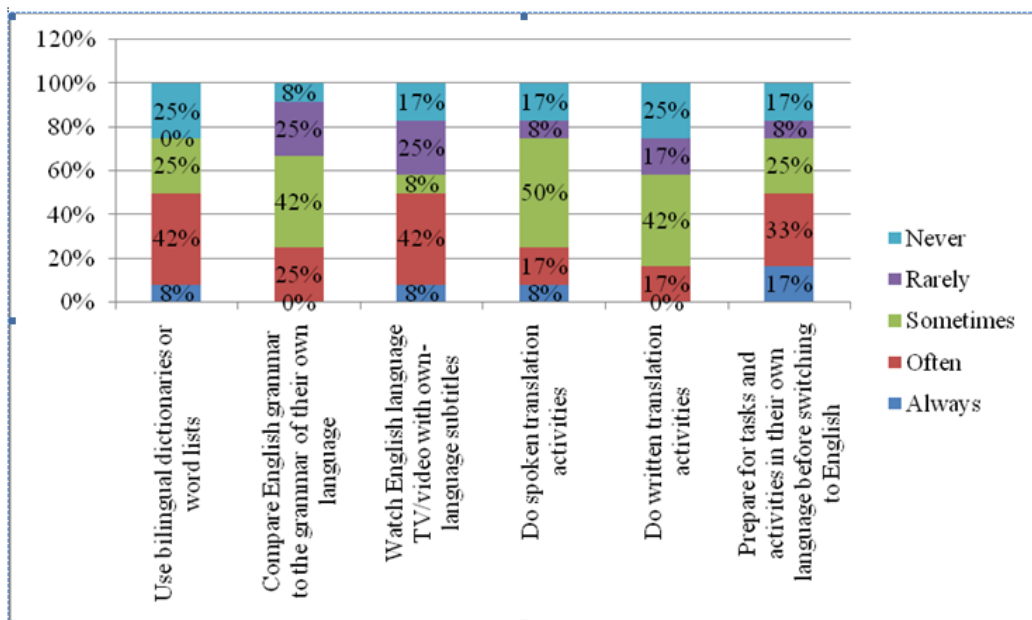
Table1: Profiles of Respondents

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Gender		
Male	8	23%
Female	28	77%
2. Age		
23-30	8	22%
31-40	7	19%
41-50	16	44%
51-60	5	14%
3. Designation		
Tutor/Demonstrator	7	19%
Assistant Lecturer	6	17%
Lecturer	19	52%
Associate Professor	-	-
Professor	4	11%
4. Teaching Experience		
1-5 years	13	36%
6-10 years	-	-
11-15 years	10	28%
16-20 years	9	25%
21-25 years	-	-
26-30 years	-	-
31-35 years	4	11%
5. Age of the learners		
12-17 years		6.7%
18-23 years		93.3%
6. Number of learners in the Class		
1-30		13%
31-50		33%
51-100		47%
100+		7%

Nearly 75 percent of the teachers describe the classes they teach as “Learners share a common own language”, and 80 percent of the teachers describe the curriculum in their institution as “Learners study English and other academic subjects”.

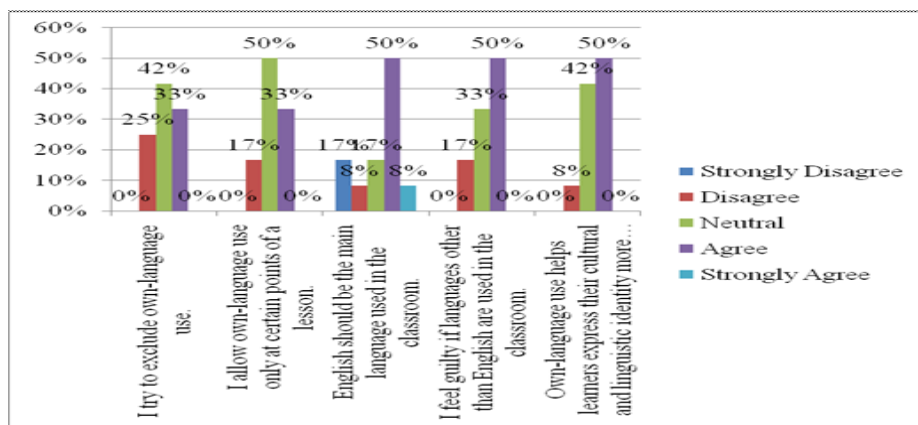
Figure 1: Reported frequency and functions of teachers' own language use in class

As can be seen from the graph, the learners' own language is used by many teachers and learners in the classroom. The majority of the participated teachers reported using the learners' own language often (42 percent), or sometimes (50 percent) to develop rapport and a good classroom. Likewise, a total of 91 percent of participants also explain grammar via the own language sometimes, often or always. Moreover, over 80 percent of the teachers report a similar frequent use of own language (84 percent) to explain vocabulary, explain when meanings in English are unclear, and give feedback on written work. A three-quarter of the participants employ it for maintaining discipline. The learners' own language is less frequently deployed to test and assess learners with 25 percent.

Figure 2: Reported frequency and functions of learners' own-language use in class

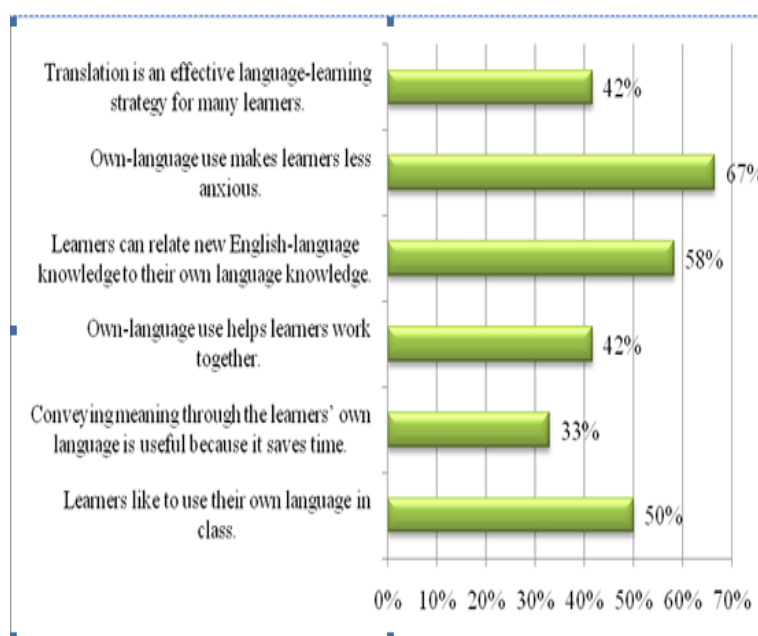
The graph clearly illustrates that vast majority of learners use their own language in class. Learners use their own language mostly (78 percent in always, often or never) in preparing for tasks and activities before switching it to English, and doing spoken translation activities. This figure is not much different for the activity of using bilingual dictionaries or wordlists with 75 percent in which participated teachers identify that one fourth of the learners are never using their own language. Watching English Language TV/Video with own language subtitles is the function where own language use is rated as the lowest in this survey with 58 percent.

Figure 3: Teachers' views on own-language use in their classroom



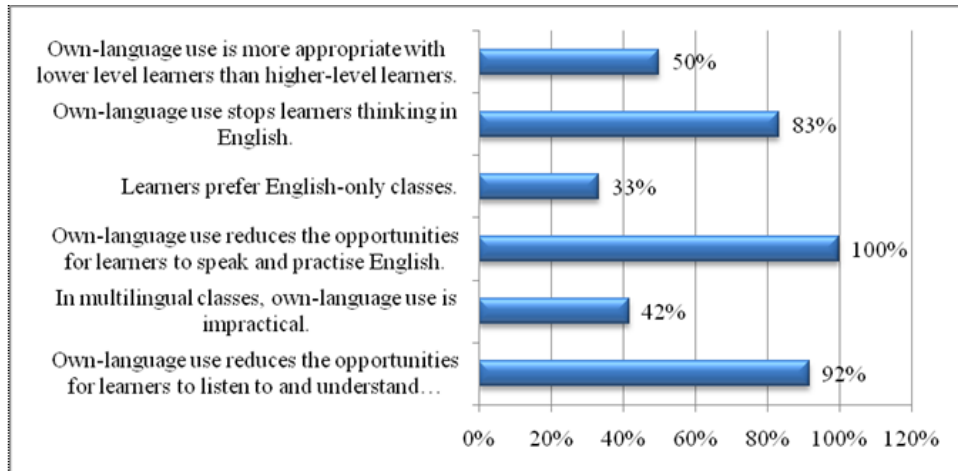
As figure shows, one third of the teachers agree that they try to exclude using own language and allowing own language use only at certain points of a lesson. The majority of the participants (42 and 50 percent) report neutral for these statements. Half of the respondents agree that English should be main language in the classroom, feeling guilty if other languages are used in steads of English in the classroom, and own-language use helps learners express their cultural and linguistic identity more easily.

Figure 4: Evaluating arguments supporting own-language use



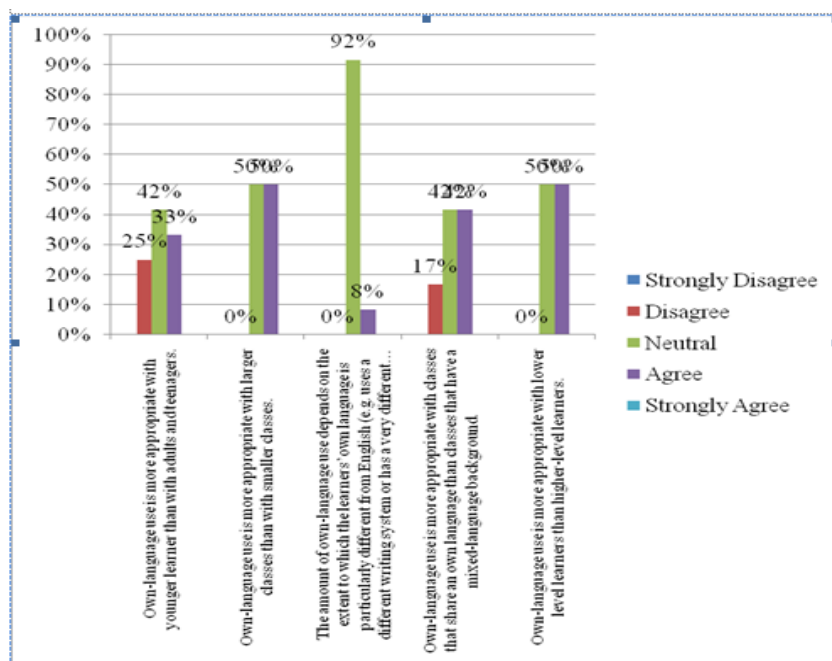
Nearly 70 percent of the participants believe that own-language use makes learners less anxious. Clearly, over and about 50 percent of the teachers agree that learners can relate new English-language knowledge to their own language knowledge, and learners like to use their own language in class. The statement “conveying meaning through the learners’ own language is useful because it saves time” is just agreed by a third of teachers.

Figure 5: Evaluating arguments against own-language use



It is significant that all teachers agree that own language use reduces the opportunities for learners to speak and practice English. Most teachers report that (92 and 83 percent) own language use reduces the opportunities for learners to speak and practice English, and stop learners thinking in English. Half of the respondents rate that using own-language is more appropriate with lower level learners than those in higher level. One third of the teachers report learners prefer English only classes.

Figure 6: The perceived appropriateness of own-language use with different groups of learners



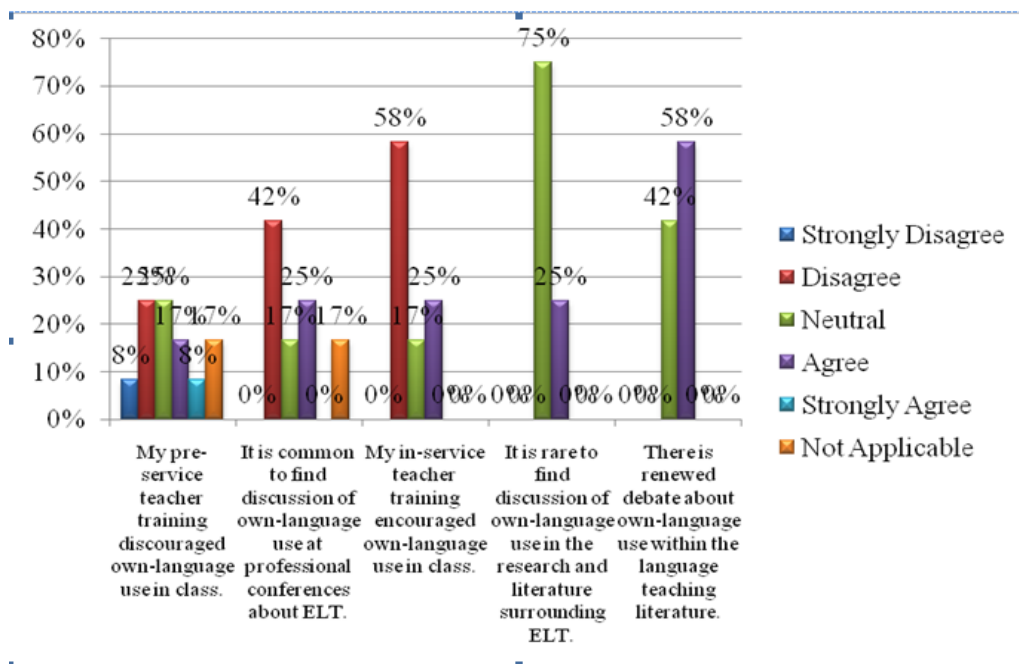
Perspectives about own language use with different groups of leaders such as age, class size, proficiency and own language background are reported as “neutral” by most participants.

Figure 7: Teachers’ perceptions of the institutional culture around own-language use

	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral%	Agree%	Strongly Agree %	Not applicable %
Teachers can decide for themselves the balance of English and own-language use in the classroom.	-	-	33.3%	50%	-	16.7%
My school/institution expects classes to be taught only in English.	-	8.3%	25%	50%	16.7%	-
Learners in your institution expect classes to be taught only in English.	-	-	50%	41.7%	8.3%	-
The government/education ministry expects classes to be taught only in English.	-	8.3%	58.3%	33.3%	-	-
Teachers in my institution feel that classes should be taught only in English.	-	8.3%	50%	41.7%	-	-
The teaching materials used include own-language explanations of English.	25%	33.3%	25%	-	16.7%	-
The teaching materials used encourage learners to use their own language during classroom activities	8.3%	41.7%	8.3%	41.7%	-	-

50 percent of the survey respondents agree that “Teachers can decide for themselves the balance of English and own-language use in the classroom” and “My school/institution expects classes to be taught only in English”. On the other hand, the same proportion of the teachers report “Neutral” on students’ and institutions’ expectations related with teaching via English language, and teachers’ attitude on teaching only with English. Over half of the teachers believe that teaching materials used do not include own language explanation of English. The fact that the teaching materials used encourage learners to use their own language during classroom activities is controversial among respondents.

Figure 8: Own-language use and professional development activities within ELT



The fact relating to pre-service training discouraged own-language use in class shows no decisive data while most of the respondents disagree with in-service teacher training encouraged own-language use in class, and it is common to find discussion of own-language use at professional conferences about ELT. Majority of the teachers respond that they are not sure about raring to find discussion of own-language use in the research and literature surrounding ELT. None of the respondents deny that there is renewed debate about own-language use within the language teaching literature.

For the research question (1), the findings clearly show that widespread own-language use within ELT. From the point of teachers’ own language use, developing rapport and a good classroom, and explaining grammar are the most engage activities. Employing learners’ own language usually experiences in the activities like explaining vocabulary, explaining when meanings in English are unclear, maintaining discipline, and giving feedback on written work. The learners’ own language is less frequently deployed to test and assess learners. These findings are in line with the research conducted by (Polio and Duff, 1994; V Cook, 2001; Kim and Elder, 2008; and Hall and Cook, 2013).

For the learners, own language is occupied over half of their language use even in the least employed activity - watching English Language TV/Video with

own language subtitles. Preparing for tasks and activities before switching it to English, using bilingual dictionaries or wordlists, and doing spoken translation activities are the most own-language engage areas which is consistent with Anton and Dicamilla, 1999; Centeno-Cortes and Jimenez Jimenez, 2004; and Hall and Cook, 2013)

For the research question (2), in contrast to several other studies of teacher attitudes to own-language use (e.g. Macaro, 1997; Littlewood and Yu, 2011) and in consistent with (Hall and Cook, 2013) the proportion of participants in this research who feel sense of guilt when languages other than English are used in the classroom, assume own-language use helps learners express their cultural and linguistic identity more easily, and use English as the main language in classrooms shows indecisive figure. Teachers seem to hold more complex and nuanced attitudes towards own-language use.

In contrast with Hall and Cook (2013), there is no firm data supported with the view of own-language is more appropriate with lower level learners than those in higher level. It is totally agreed on the fact that own language can reduce the all possible chances of manipulating English: speaking, practicing, listening, understanding, and thinking. Moreover, there is no report which supports firmly to the own-language use like the arguments: own-language lessens learners' anxiety, relate knowledge in English Language, and learners preferences on own-language. Perspectives about own language use with different groups of leaders such as age, class size, proficiency and own language background are not reported clear data by most participants.

For research question (3), the sizeable proportion of the teachers agrees that school/institution expects classes to be taught only in English, they have preferences using only English in classrooms, and it is also noted that they can decide for themselves the extent of own-language use in their classrooms. They also reveal that the current teaching materials do not encourage students to prefer students' own language. There is no disagreement on the fact that learners are expecting to be taught in English.

There remains no supportive view for trainings discourage the use of English language in classrooms, and also sizable view that having professional discussions about own-language use.

Conclusion

Within ELT classrooms in Myanmar, own language use prevails in particular certain activities related to building rapport and teaching grammar although the majority of the teachers are recognizing using target language mainly in their practices. More own language than target one is employed for the learners in every activity mentioned in this study. Despite holding more complex and nuanced attitudes towards own-language use, teachers response to the target language used in classrooms and the importance of English in their teaching. Most of Teachers said there is the expectation of English as a medium of instruction from both learners and schools/institutions they are working for. The limitations of the study are employing the only a quantitative method to collect the required data, small sample size, difficult access to the participants, and lack of prior research studies on the topic.

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