

THE ROLE OF SPANISH IN EFL CLASSES FOR THE FIFTH-LEVEL STUDENTS AND
TEACHERS OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEGREE AT A PRIVATE
UNIVERSITY.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to identify the particular situations in which Spanish takes place in EFL classes with fifth-level students and teachers at a private university located in the municipality of Rionegro, Antioquia. This paper integrates a qualitative research method and concentrates mainly on the systematization of experiences of the selected participants. The data collection methods involved interviews, questionnaires, and non-participant observations which were developed to explore students and teachers' opinions and perceptions about the constraints and acceptance of the use of their mother tongue within English classes.

The findings presented in this paper suggests that most of the participants believe that the use of the mother tongue (Spanish) plays a supporting role during the process of learning a foreign language (English) and becomes a facilitator in the classroom for students at the moment of solving doubts, expressing feelings or opinions, and translating complex vocabulary, and for teachers when clarifying the activities performed in class and improve the relation teacher-student. These appear to be the most common situations in which the Spanish language occurs.

Key words: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), mother tongue, language transfer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays learning a second language has become an issue of paramount importance for many people, especially when it comes to English, one of the most spoken and influential languages in the world. However, trying to learn a new language is not an easy task to accomplish, it implies learning certain elements that can sometimes be external to our local knowledge, and in order to understand them, it is necessary to use tools that facilitate their comprehension. For instance, there are occasions in which the L1 (Spanish) serves as a tool, it supports the understanding of some concepts in L2 (English) that would probably be more arduous for the learner to identify without this help. The use of the L1 in the L2 learning process can be beneficial in several ways and this is the reason why this research project emerged.

Taking into consideration that our research project is about the role of Spanish in EFL classes, we explored local and international journals with previous studies in the field in order to expand our understanding on this issue, additionally, it allowed us to analyze this phenomenon in different contexts and to establish the relevance of our study.

In Colombia, Cuartas (2014) explored some cases where the mother tongue was used selectively to strengthen students' English learning processes which led to an increment of their confidence when using this language. Forty ninth-graders from a girl's public high school located on the northwest side of Medellín were part of this research study.

This action research study implemented both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data collection methods included observations, questionnaires, audio-recording, field notes and interviews, which were later triangulated in order to obtain reliable results.

In the findings, the study revealed that the students' L1 played an important role in the EFL classroom by supporting students in their learning process and helping them to acquire vocabulary, to compare words' meaning and to increase their confidence.

Based on the results, the author mentioned that the mother tongue contributes in a positive manner to EFL classes when it is used in the most suitable moments and he restated the importance of students' mother tongue in their learning processes.

In relation to the aforementioned, Durán and López (2014) conducted a case study from 2011 to 2013, which aimed to research on the use of Spanish and the influence that social and educational factors had within the teaching-learning process of English in *Localidad 2*, a primary public school in Cartagena. The participants in this project varied across the different stages of the research; during the first year there were 38 third graders and in 2012 and 2013 the number of students decreased slightly passing from 34 to 31. There was also a different teacher each year; none of them was highly proficient in English.

Throughout this research project, the data from class observations, interviews and surveys was used. As a result, the authors found that there are some specific moments in which the use of the L1 is required by the students, for instance, to give explanations, to translate some words or sentences, to give general instructions, and to evaluate students' comprehension. Additionally, it is a helping tool that should be used moderately to avoid hindering the teaching-learning process of a foreign language. (Durán & López, 2014). After analyzing the data, the authors concluded that Spanish is often employed among teachers and students, and it can be considered as the main tool for communicating in the classes. (Durán & López, 2014).

At an international level, a study conducted in Mexico sought to identify the role of the use of L1 (Spanish) in the learning process of a L2 (English). The hypothesis behind this study was that the teachers' ability to use the L1 properly in the students' first levels of the

process is the key to learn effectively and to prevent frustration. (Barrientos, Fonseca, Ordaz, Ortiz & Sánchez, 2015)

The participants were students between the ages 18 and 25 from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Acatlán, who were in the beginners' English class, and teachers who taught in these levels and had more than a year of experience. Surveys and interviews were used to obtain the required data. The analysis revealed that students consider the use of Spanish in the English class a favorable factor to clarify their doubts. On the other hand, even though teachers prefer to teach the classes exclusively in English, most of them considered Spanish as a pedagogical tool, because students can feel more comfortable and with confidence to express their concerns.

In conclusion, according to Barrientos et al. (2015), L1 performs a supporting role which leads students to gain more confidence and to have a better comprehension when employing some proper elements of the language, e.g; vocabulary, grammatical structures, and translation procedures. Based on the results of this research, the authors reported that teachers are expected to have an effective use of Spanish to impart a significant L2 learning to the students, as it can also produce positive effects on the student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, it serves as a guide to clarify doubts and to avoid negative language interferes.

In 2015, Paker and Karaağaç developed a study in Turkey which aimed to explore the use and functions of the mother tongue (Turkish) while learning a foreign language (English). The study was carried out using mixed methods from a descriptive perspective and included 20 English instructors and their 286 students.

Data was collected through audio recordings of some classes, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The results suggested that the participants used their mother tongue to express feelings, explain doubts, and grammar rules. Although they were not aware of the functions of the L1 in the classroom, they recognized its importance.

Finally, the authors concluded that a moderated use of the mother tongue helps students to achieve challenging tasks in EFL classes.

In view of the studies previously provided, there is a strong evidence that the L1 serves as an aid by which the students can consolidate their knowledge of the target language. This is why its use might be essential and vary according to the students' needs. It seems safe to conclude that the use of the L1 is an effective tool to be implemented in the classroom and it should not be separated from the L2 since it helps students to establish the relation between both languages. As future teachers, we are in charge of facilitating a better comprehension of the foreign language to our students and this is only possible if we are aware of the different advantages of the appropriate use of the L1 inside of our classrooms; thus, one of the greatest aims of this research was to contribute to studies with a similar approach, to the foreign language teacher training, and especially to the Colombian educational field.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In spite of the different points of view regarding the use of the mother tongue when learning English, the students in charge of this research identified, from their perspective, that the selective use of Spanish plays a crucial role in the acquisition process. Although it is generally accepted that the use of the target language should be encouraged in EFL contexts, because as Harbord, J. (1992) states "to let students use their mother tongue is a humanistic approach in that it permits them to say what they want", thus, the use of Spanish should not be neglected considering that the mother tongue facilitates the way students see the target language by comparing their structures and vocabulary, as well as providing them with enough confidence to express their feelings and opinions, and supporting their learning process.

In most EFL classes, the use of Spanish is avoided to provide students a full immersion in the target language, which allows students to get in touch with the language and to learn in a more natural way. For instance, Howatt (1984) states that methodologies such as the Direct Method and later the Natural Method and the Audiolingual Method (ALM) emerged as a response to the widely spread translation method. These new methodologies sought to expose students to the target language while disregarding and restricting the use of the students' mother tongues. One of the reasons why the use of Spanish is discouraged is because the aim is not only to teach the language but other aspects that could lead to an approach to the cultures where English is spoken and to the different realities that come with it, which will allow the students to have a greater preparation and performance when using the target language.

Nevertheless, after analyzing our experience as foreign language students, we realized that the reality of the education in Colombia is different, since Spanish is generally part of the EFL classes.

One of the reached conclusions when talking about our experiences was that teachers try to make big efforts to fulfill students' needs, it is difficult because the context does not require the use of English in a regular basis, which makes the process of teaching English more challenging than it should be.

As a result, there is an excessive use of Spanish in the classes and students do not obtain the adequate skills to be proficient in the target language and end up graduating from high school and starting their higher education without enough language foundations. Consequently, students face a new reality which differs from what they used to do and where speaking Spanish is not usually permitted.

This is why, we, as students of a foreign language teaching program and pre-service teachers, considered that it was important to develop this research project to identify the role

of Spanish in the EFL classes of a language education program at a private university in Rionegro, Antioquia, based on the teachers and students' opinions regarding this topic. Although some methodologies suggest a limited use of the mother tongue in EFL classes, it is clear that Spanish is part of the students' learning process.

This research project sought to take into account the experiences of some students and teachers when learning and teaching English and to provide information that might be useful for the improvement of the current methodologies and might allow to identify the impact the use of the mother tongue has had in the process of learning and teaching English as a foreign language.

Based on the facts previously provided, we believe that the incorporation of Spanish is a great concern in the teaching practice. This research aimed to collect different opinions regarding the moments in which Spanish serves as a tool within the learning-teaching process of a foreign language and when it is not completely necessary. Thus, the data collected contributed positively to the current teaching practices in the university foreign language program.

From our experiences as students and pre-services teachers we consider that Spanish should not be discarded at the moment of teaching a foreign language. It is through Spanish that the differences and similarities between both languages can be identified, which will allow more positive results in the learning process of the students and will provide a more comfortable learning environment.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the role of Spanish for the fifth-level students and teachers in EFL classes in the 2019-1 semester at the foreign language teaching education program of a private university in Colombia?

JUSTIFICATION

Based on our personal experience, the use of Spanish in EFL classes can be employed as a base to understand structures, grammar, and other significant parts of the target language. “The L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English.” (Auerbach, 1993, p. 19). This is why we considered relevant to take into account the process that students already have in the development of their mother tongue to support their learning process in EFL classes.

The decision of this research project was made upon our personal experience as students of the foreign language teaching program and our belief that there is a need concerning the ease with which students feel more confident learning a new language, and the standards regarding the teaching of foreign languages inside a private university in Colombia, in which the only language accepted inside the classrooms is the target language, and the use of Spanish is nearly banned. Hence, we considered it was pertinent to analyze the different phenomena that take place in EFL classrooms in relation to Spanish.

The use of Spanish allows teachers to find the best strategies to establish comparisons and relations between both languages that help to improve the teaching process and to connect the student’s background knowledge with the new acquired knowledge. In addition, Cook as cited in Pan, Y., and Pan, Y. (2011). “[...] For example, L1 may help present the meanings of abstract and complicated vocabulary items in a less time consuming but more effective manner.” (p. 5) This means, students’ L1 contributes to a better understanding of the new topics, such as abstract definitions, and it assists the teacher when clarifying the activities performed in class, thus, the relation teacher-student is improved.

Furthermore, when students use their mother language during classes, it relieves the pressure and students tend to feel more confident and feel less frustrated while trying to

understand the topics reviewed in class, and while asking a doubt in an English structure they still do not handle. Thereby, it is relevant to bear in mind that language requires certain skills to be understood, so learning a foreign language can be a challenge even for students who are in advanced levels, and it can represent a great disadvantage or prejudice for certain students who consider Spanish as an essential means to obtain a meaningful understanding.

When coming up with the idea for this research project, our main objective was to contribute to how the learning of a foreign language is seen inside the educational field and in our specific context, as well as creating a foundation that helps us, as future teachers, to bring forth new strategies that take into account the opinions of people involved in this matter, in such manner that we can help our future students to have a convenient learning process and at the same time, chip in and take part of the growth of the foreign language teaching program at a private university in Colombia.

OBJECTIVES

General Objective

Describe the role Spanish has had in EFL classes for the fifth - level students and teachers at the foreign language teaching educational program at a private university in Colombia.

Specific Objectives

- Explore the students and teachers' perceptions on the use of Spanish in EFL classes.
- Identify the function Spanish has in the learning and teaching process in EFL classes.

CONCEPTUAL REFERENCES

In order to address our research question, it is essential to highlight various theoretical aspects that allow us to have a more appropriate contextualization of the role of Spanish in EFL classroom. This study focused on the relation of the use of the mother tongue when learning a foreign language and some sociolinguistic factors within this process; therefore, in this section, we intend to present the concepts of *mother tongue*, *EFL*, and *language transfer*.

Mother Tongue

A connection with the concept of mother tongue has been found by a considerable number of authors either implicitly or explicitly. This term is defined by Kroon (2003) as the first approach we have to a language that comes from home and it is usually the language that the mother speaks to her children, who learn it inductively without mediation of any schools; nevertheless, this does not mean that the mother tongue has nothing to do with education.

Although the mother tongue makes us think of a more local and familiar environment, it is necessary to emphasize that language is an extensive subject which can be studied from different contexts and realities. Kroon mentions that “‘Mother tongue’ then refers to the official standardized language variety that is used as a school language, i.e., that serves as the medium of teaching and learning in educational contexts” (2003, p. 3). It means that the mother tongue prevails as the main source of communication.

English as a Foreign Language

In light of this, we can point out that the English language has become an international communication tool which not only takes place in educational contexts, but it is also learned for different reasons. When a language is learned in a place where it is not widely used, it is seen as a foreign language, this is also the case of the English language in the Colombian context. To support this argument, Nayar as cited in Tarnopolsky (2000) points

out that “EFL is when English is taught in countries where it has little or no internal communicative function or sociopolitical status” (p. 3). This means that when English is taught in contexts where learners have a limited exposure to the language and they do not have to deal with situations where the language is used, English is not seen as a second language, but as a foreign one.

Furthermore, according to Gebhard as cited in Ruusunen (2011) “EFL refers to English as studied by people who live in places where English is not the first language of people who live in the country” (p. 11). Littlewood (as cited in Ruusunen, 2011) advocates that in a foreign language learning situation the language is mostly taught to communicate with people who live outside the context rather than interacting with the ones who live in it.

Language Transfer

Similarly, taking into account that the mother tongue facilitates the process of communication, it is relevant to examine how it intervenes in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. Following this idea, there is a discussion in how the L1 affects the way we see and acquire a new language, various authors have discussed the term language transfer, and they have designated it different names; however, their definitions share similar characteristics. It can be understood as “...the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.” (Odlin, 1989, p. 27). An approximate definition is shared by Sharwood (1994), who refers to language transfer as the effects the first language, or any language known, have in the learners’ execution, and acquisition process of a new language.

The structure of the first language is rooted in the learners’ minds, and when they try to produce in the target language, they involuntarily use the structures of their mother tongue. Selinker (1966) states that language transfer can be identified if a pattern of the mother tongue

tends to influence a similar pattern in the target language and affects the learners' skills production.

Several opinions seem to remark that language transfer is one of the major influential factors inside the learning process of a foreign language. Thus, it is important for this research to dig deeper into the subject and find out how it influences the way students interpret its role within their learning process.

Consequently, the conceptualization of these terms is critical to lead this research, have a more specific focus regarding our objectives and be able to identify the role the mother tongue, Spanish, has within the EFL classes through the perceptions of the selected participants.

METHODOLOGY

With the purpose of gaining knowledge about the relevance of the use of Spanish in EFL classes, this section addresses the research approach and the type of study that was developed based on certain authors. This section also provides information about the criteria to select the participants, as well as the description of the data collection methods that were held along this research project.

When it comes to identifying the impact that Spanish has on EFL classes, there is a variety of methods that can be considered as the best way to interpret this phenomenon. This paper claims that teachers and students' insights play an important role since they facilitate the progress and development of this research; therefore, we considered that the implementation of a qualitative approach was the best choice since it provides information that represents a prominent factor to achieve the purpose of this project. As stated by Creswell (2009):

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (p. 4).

In addition, this research sought to systematize the teachers and students' experiences regarding the role of Spanish in EFL classrooms. The concept systematization of experiences is conceived as a method that focuses on gathering multiple lived experiences from the researcher and other people surrounding a specific phenomenon, with the purpose of reflecting on them. It allows us to understand how people's feelings and points of view can be completely different after going through the same situation and how that situation influences their lives (Jara, 2011). This is why we intended to analyze the phenomenon that takes place in our educational environment by hearing the different opinions of our teachers, classmates, and taking into account our own perspectives since we are students of the foreign language programme at the same university.

In this way, the data collection implemented involved teachers and students' insights and prior knowledge that arise from practical contact with English, which encouraged us to generate knowledge that could turn into something productive that might contribute to the transformation of the educational reality of this private university.

PARTICIPANTS SELECTION CRITERIA

The participants involved in this study were 30 fifth-level students and 4 teachers that make part of the foreign language teaching program of the private university in which this study was carried out. The criteria for selecting the participants to be observed included being at least eighteen years old. Regarding the interviews, students needed to have attended the previous four levels. In the case of the teachers, having an active contract was required.

Besides, teachers needed to have taught the fifth English level subject in the foreign language teaching program or be currently teaching it.

Following the ethical issues regarding research projects, the participants involved were informed about the purpose of this research and the importance of their contribution to accomplish it. We used the necessary tools to protect the participants' contributions through consent forms which allowed hiding their identities with pseudonyms chosen by them. The information collected was used with integrity and fairness as well as kept in a safe place.

After collecting the required data, it was essential to have a plan to analyze the information in an organized way with the purpose of having proper final results ready to be shared with the participants and the public.

We used a thematic analysis that as claimed by Dawson, K. (2002) is a type of analysis in which the themes are arisen from the data and not constructed by the researcher, thus, they come inductively. To analyze the data collected, we take into account the process that Richards (2003) proposes as the best way to analyze qualitative data. As the first step, we collected enough information from students and teachers; as the second step we thought about the data collected and its relation to the aims of the project and other research papers; as the third step, we coded the data and organized it into categories; as the fourth step we reflected on what we found and we added more comments and information about it; as the fifth step we arrange the categories in different ways to look forward different perspectives, connections or common information, after that we connected the findings to previous studies and the last step was interpreting all the information to find conclusions. (p. 272)

Regarding the data collection methods, questionnaires were uploaded to an online database that analyzed the responses for each proposed question (See Appendix C). As the questionnaires provided limited information, it was necessary to complement them with the interviews which were recorded in order to have a deep analysis. The recording of the

interviews were transcribed to compare the students and teachers' responses according to each category.

The analyzed results were shared with the participants, these were displayed through a research presentation that took place in the university in order to let them know that their contributions were used in an appropriate and fruitful way, at the same time it allowed us to verify whether the data collection methods gave the same information about the role of Spanish in EFL classes.

DATA COLLECTION

In this regard, to be able to gather the most suitable information we selected various data collection methods, such as observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires.

Observations

Burns (1999) states that "Observation enables researchers to document and reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events as they actually occur" (p. 80). This information helps us to have a better understanding of the relevance of this method in the educational field. Thus, from various assigned tasks that involved direct observations in our learning process, we could conclude that these ones permit to focus on analyzing people's behavior and the situations where they take place, with the objective of understanding, interpreting, and giving an answer to a previously stated question.

Specifically, we chose non-participant observations since with this type of observations, according to Altrichter, Feldman, and Posch (2005) "it is easier for the non-participant observer to focus attention on the events that are important [...] and write observation notes that will be genuinely useful" (p. 90).

This type of method (non-participant observations) involved eight sections of observation in EFL classes from the fifth integrated English level with a duration of one hour

and a half each. Therefore, each researcher had the opportunity to attend one section in both classrooms. Thirty students and two teachers participated in the observations where their ongoing behavior and their interactions allowed us to identify the moments in which Spanish occurred. Besides, during the observations each researcher carried a journal where specific moments and examples were written to be organized in the specific categories afterwards, and also a recorder in order to obtain more trustful results.

This served us as an aid to observe our participants without holding active participation and having a personal appreciation of the phenomena that take place in the classroom.

Questionnaires

Ultimately, we used questionnaires to complement the collected information from the interviews and these covered a wider range of participants.

Google forms was the chosen tool to organize and systematize the results, however, five minutes before finishing classes, thirty printed multiple-choice questionnaires were provided to all of the students of both groups since as reported by Bell (2005) “There are distinct advantages in being able to give questionnaires to respondents personally. You can explain the purpose of the study, and in some cases questionnaires can be completed on the spot” (p. 148) in this way, questionnaires were distributed face to face; thus, we had the opportunity to be more specific with the instructions and the purpose of our visit as well as to solve students’ particular concerns.

This is the reason why we regarded this method as a suitable resource that could lead us to reliable results regarding the impact that Spanish has in EFL classes.

Interviews

Interviews seem to be a useful source to be implemented. We were taught from research classes that this might lead to spontaneous conversations that pretend to find out people's opinions, thoughts, feelings, and particular ideas with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding. We decided to select semi-structured interviews which according to Stuckey (2013) "...are often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to allow researchers to develop a keen understanding the topic of interest necessary for developing relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions" (p. 57).

The interview processes took place in a peaceful classroom at a private university whose duration was about 10 minutes each. Seven students and four teachers were involved in the process of the conversation while being recorded, which lead us to collect in-depth information on their opinions and experiences in relation to our research question (See Appendix D & E). This allowed us to know thoroughly the participants' judgments and assumptions regarding the research object and to develop it in a more comfortable way.

FINDINGS

This research paper aimed to identify the role of Spanish when learning English and the most common factors that intervene in the use of Spanish during EFL classes' transfer of Spanish on the English language.

In order to gather the needed information, some observations took place in EFL classes, as well as recorded interviews and questionnaires were conducted to validate all the participants' answers and opinions.

The analysis and comparison of data revealed that the participants' opinions regarding the use of Spanish in classes led to different factors that somehow facilitated or delayed the development of the English language. In order to answer our research question, we decided to

classify the information into three emergent categories: doubts & explanations, personal opinion & feelings, and translation.

The section below provides further details of the aforementioned categories.

Doubts & Explanations

One of the main reasons why students appealed for the use of Spanish in EFL classes was to clarify the concerns and doubts that arise from the existent interaction between the L1 and L2. The analysis of the data from the observations indicated that students use Spanish frequently to interact among them when they have no clarity about what they are expected to do during the class.

It was evidenced that students feel more confident to ask their classmates for help in Spanish instead of asking the teacher to repeat again the task to be accomplished. The following paragraph is an excerpt from our journal and it describes the aforementioned statement.

“Students try to solve their doubts among them, if they do not understand the explanation given by the teacher, they ask the nearest classmate about what they should do and they also answer in Spanish.” (Journal, group #2, Apr 3rd)

During four weeks of observation, we were able to identify that most students used their mother tongue to clarify their doubts regarding different activities that took place in the English classes.

Furthermore, it was identified that not only students used the Spanish language in classes but also that teachers were using it because when students addressed the teacher using their mother tongue to solve some of their doubts, the teachers tended to give answers in Spanish.

The example below is a good illustration of this:

“Students use Spanish to clarify what they are supposed to do, for instance (profes entonces así está bien...?) The teacher also uses Spanish to respond. (Déjame ver... mmm, sí, así está bien)” (Journal, group #1, Apr 5)

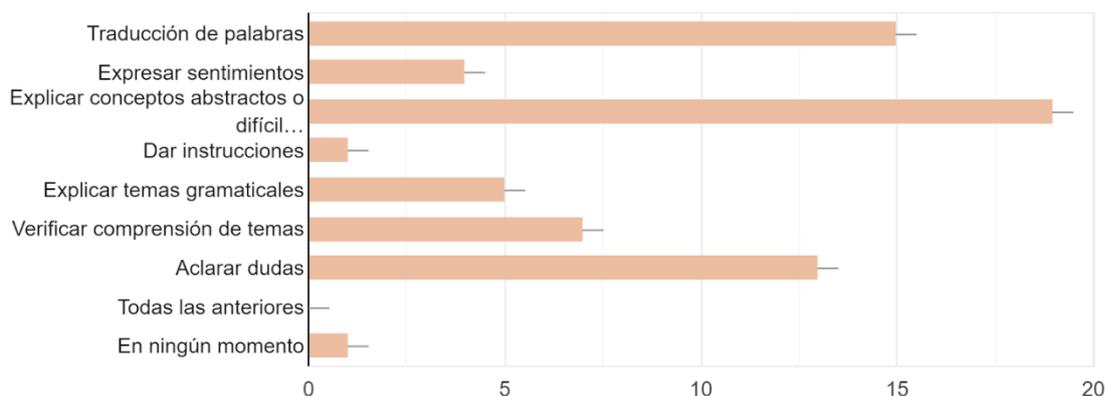
The excerpt above shows how students use their mother tongue to confirm their understanding of the activities of the class. Students formulate the question in their mother tongue and the teacher also answers using this language.

Following the same line, the analysis of the questionnaires indicated that there are some specific situations in which most of the students find convenient the use of Spanish in English classes and agree on speaking in their mother tongue to solve doubts and explain abstract concepts.

The graphic presented below served as evidence to support students’ insights concerning the specific situations in which it is necessary the use of Spanish Language in EFL classes.

¿En qué situaciones específicas durante las clases de inglés ve necesario el uso del español?

30 respuestas



Graph 1. Questionnaire: Use of Spanish (Doubts & Explanations)

The graph 1 illustrates the participants' answers to the question number 3: *'in which specific situations do you think it is necessary the use of Spanish during English classes?'* developed during the questionnaire (See appendix C). Most of the students answered that they use Spanish to translate words, to explain abstract or difficult concepts and to clarify doubts. Some other participants expressed that they decided to use Spanish to express feelings, to understand grammatical topics and to verify their understanding about different topics. Only a few students chose the option 'to give instructions' as one of the situations where Spanish is more suitable; while other small part stated that there is no need of using Spanish during English classes.

Similarly, interviews developed at a private university for the fifth-level students during EFL classes also provided evidence of the use that students make of their mother tongue. According to students' personal opinions, they reasserted their thoughts about the most common situations in which Spanish might take place. These situations were similar to the ones displayed in the graph above.

“Como lo decía de pronto ahora, de pronto en la explicación porque no sé más que hay temas que son muy complejos de pronto el momento de una explicación o algo que se vea como que no entendemos lo que el profesor no es capaz por decirlo así de explicar el tema en inglés de pronto el español podría ser útil en ese momento”

[As I was saying, maybe with explanations, because I know there are complicated topics. Maybe when we are in the middle of an explanation or something that looks complicated and we are not going to understand, thus the teacher is not able to explain it in English. Then, Spanish might be useful] (Interview, Florecita, Apr 23rd)

“Es necesario cuando el tema es muy complejo y no se tiene como claridad y ya muchas veces ya se ha explicado en inglés y no se llega como a entender bien”.

[It is necessary when the topic is too complex and there is no, like, clarity and it has been explained many times in English and there is still not full understanding of it] (Interview, Gris, Apr 23rd)

Florecita pointed out that some of the topics seen during the EFL classes are difficult to understand, that is the reason why she thinks Spanish is necessary when understanding new topics. Likewise, Gris stated that after a topic has been explained several times without clarity, Spanish is necessary.

As it was evidenced, students find Spanish more useful when topic explanation is required since when teachers employ the English language, it demands more effort on students' behalf and could cause hardships or confusion with the messages that are intended to give.

Most of the information gathered seemed to coincide on the fact that clarifying doubts and the explanation of an abstract topic in a language other than the mother tongue can be challenging, both for teachers and students.

The use of the mother tongue in an ELT environment seems to come to light when students do not understand the tasks they are supposed to accomplish, which leads them to ask their classmates and sometimes, small talks or short conversations between two or three students about their concerns, which take place mainly in their mother tongue.

Personal Opinion & Feelings

Data from the observations reported that students expressed their feelings in Spanish to complain or give appreciations towards the given assignments. It was evidenced that students talked among them in a low tone of voice to have this type of conversations. The following extracts from the journal display descriptions of the conversations among students observed in group one.

“Durante las clases los estudiantes hablan entre ellos sobre las actividades y hacen comentarios sobre si están aburridos o si la actividad es difícil, también utilizan expresiones en español acerca de lo que sienten por ejemplo: “¡Ay si que horrible!”, y para quejarse “¡Que pereza!” (Journal, group 1, March 20th).

[In the classes, students talk to each other about the tasks and comment whether they are bored or if the activity is hard, they also use expressions in Spanish about what they feel, for example ‘*¡Ay sí, qué horrible!*’ and to complain as well: ‘*¡Qué pereza!*’] (Journal, group #1, March 20th)

During the observations that were developed in the English classes, both students from group number one and number two agree on the use of their mother tongue to express their feelings and opinions regarding the tasks developed in class.

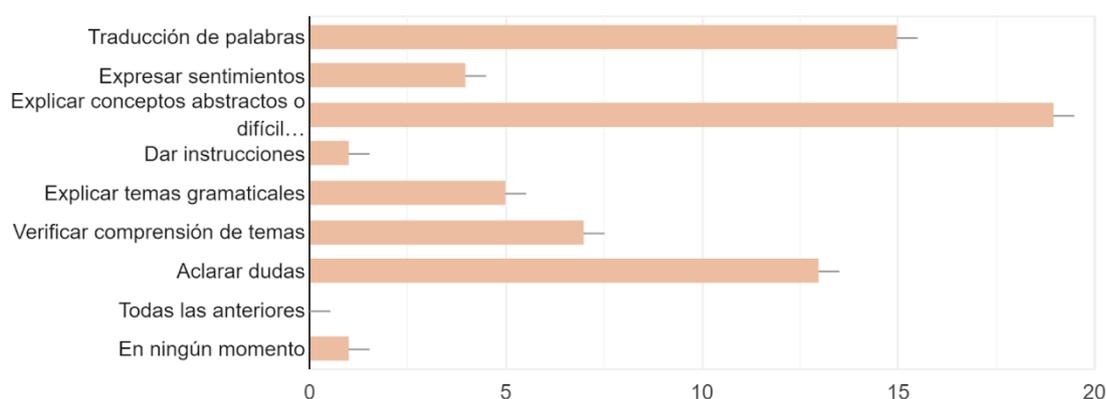
“Los estudiantes debían crear una historia en base a unas imágenes, al final, los estudiantes debían dar una opinión y comentar sobre si había similitudes entre ellas. Varios de los estudiantes opinaron sobre las historias de sus compañeros y dieron apreciaciones personales en español. “pues, el final era casi el mismo” “muy buena actividad profe” (Journal, group #2, March 22nd)

[Students had to create a story based on some images; at the end, they had to give an opinion and comment if there were any similarities between them. Several students gave their opinions on their classmates’ stories, as well as personal appreciations in Spanish. ‘pues, al final era casi el mismo’, ‘muy buena actividad profe’] (Journal, group #2, March 22nd)

Unlike the observations, the analysis of the questionnaires displayed that few students consider that the use of Spanish is not required to talk about their personal feelings. The graphic below served as evidence to support the previous statement

¿En qué situaciones específicas durante las clases de inglés ve necesario el uso del español?

30 respuestas



Graph 2. Questionnaire: Use of Spanish (feelings & opinions)

The analysis of the bar graph 2 provides information that allowed us to compare the answers given by participants concerning ‘in which specific situations they think it was necessary the use of Spanish during English classes. The data was divided into eight categories: translation of words, expression of feelings, explanation of abstract and difficult concepts, giving instructions, explanation of grammatical topics, verification of understanding of different topics, clarification of doubts and never.

Just a few students chose that Spanish is useful to express their feelings. Whilst most participants use Spanish to clarify abstract concepts and to translate words.

When comparing the information obtained from these two different data collection methods (observations and questionnaires) it may be considered that the results seem to be dissimilar. Nonetheless, regarding the interviews, there were some students who gave us

further information on the idea of expressing their personal opinion and feelings, which allowed us to have a wider overview of the issue. For instance, these two participants were willing to express their thoughts about this.

“...Pero también es importante el uso del español debido a que pues el estudiante no en toda la hora de clase de inglés sabe cómo expresar sus ideas y sentimientos, o cómo decirlos, entonces a veces tiene que recurrir como a pensar en español para poder dar la idea en su lengua para que los estudiantes y el profesor le entiendan todo a uno.” (Interview, Klauss, Apr 23rd)

[... But the use of Spanish is also important because students do not know how to express their ideas and feelings at all times while in English class, nor how to utter them; so, sometimes, it is necessary to resort to think in Spanish and give the idea in the mother tongue so students and teachers can understand you completely.]

During the interviews that took place at the university, with the fifth-level students, the participant ‘Klauss’ expressed that students are not able to express their feelings and ideas in English at all times while in class, thus, they recur to Spanish as a tool so their classmates and teacher can understand them.

“cuando hay términos que son totalmente en el idioma español que no los encuentro o frases o maneras en el idioma inglés que aún no sé, entonces tengo que usarlo en español, porque necesito expresar mi idea ...” (Interview, Andres 19, Apr 23rd)

[When there are terms that are in the Spanish language completely and I cannot find them, or sentences or ways in the English language I still do not know, then I need to use them in Spanish, because I need to express my idea...]

Another participant from the same Integrated English class stated that when he does not know the proper vocabulary to express himself, he uses Spanish as a resort.

The information collected revealed that students' personal opinions occur mainly in Spanish. The use of the mother tongue fosters students' confidence at the moment of giving their opinions and sharing their feelings in front of others. Despite the fact that questionnaires demonstrated that students had little resort to the use of Spanish to express their ideas and opinions, Spanish still represents a profitable tool that helps students to convey their ideas in a more genuine and natural parlance.

Translation

The data collected evidenced that, in order to have effective insights of the information conveyed, translation is essential for the students' learning process. They need to implement a comparison between the English language and their mother tongue. Throughout the observations, it was evidenced that students found it difficult to express the sense of specific expressions in the English language, since these might not have an equivalent or might not transmit the same message.

During the fourth observation, the teacher asked their students to give some strategies to obtain high scores in each of the skills for one of the standardized test required. At the moment of talking about the strategies, some students employed Spanish expressions in their speech so that, what they meant to say, could be better perceived by the audience.

Evidence in support of this affirmation can be found in the following extract which was taken from the fourth observation of group number two.

“It was evidenced that one student used the expression “¡por eso!” since it is possible that it did not have an equivalent in English or the expression is totally rooted to their native language.” (Journal, Group #2, Apr 3rd)

Observers realized that there were some specific expressions that do not have a translation from Spanish into English and that it is necessary that students say those expressions in their mother tongue, Spanish.

In this case, it is possible that words that represent any emotions, feelings or sensations in the students' native language might not have a direct or literal translation from the English language. This could be an explanation why students find convenient to translate these particular words back into Spanish.

In addition to this observation excerpt, it should be noted that translation is not a subject that only concerns students but teachers. Even though teachers, during the course, attempt to communicate the majority of time in the target language, there are some moments in which they recognize that it is difficult to find an equivalent for each Spanish word. For this reason, to overcome any confusion in students and to develop a better understanding of the information, teachers tend to translate these words in order to enable a more effective communication between the students.

The teacher from group number two offered a wider overview about this topic.

... para explicar conceptos que son difíciles o que no tienen una traducción en el Español que sea fácil de entender, entonces, también todos estos conceptos que son abstractos y que no puede inferirse de la explicación que se le dé en inglés, a pesar de que se haya intentado antes, me hacen recurrir al español. (Interview, teacher # 1, May 29th)

[...To explain concepts that are either hard or that do not have an understandable Spanish translation; therefore, all of these concepts are also abstract and cannot be inferred from the given explanation, despite of trying it before, they make me resort to Spanish] (Interview, teacher # 1, May 29th).

In the interview (See appendix E), the teacher # 1 stated that in English, there are some specific concepts that do not have a literal translation into Spanish. For that reason, after

several explanations in English, it is required to use the mother tongue to explain what those concepts mean.

The teacher # 1 complemented his answer by saying that he uses Spanish when he needs to clarify specific ideas in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Otra situación en la que uso es el español, es para aclarar cosas que sean muy urgentes o que puedan tener doble interpretaciones o temas que son muy delicados... (Interview, teacher # 1, May 29th)

[Another situation in which I use Spanish is to clarify things that are urgent and might have different interpretations or very delicate topics...] (Interview, teacher # 1, May 29th).

Bearing in mind the above, it is important to highlight that there are some English words that could resemble Spanish words; however, these possess a completely different meaning, and thus, teachers find useful to make the distinction in Spanish since students could come up with different ideas or thoughts of the intended message.

At the time of reviewing the data, we identified that some teachers reflect on the idea that immediate translations of any word or content should be the last resort to adopt when explaining. In like manner, some of them consider that explanations should not go even further in regards to the target language because students might be utterly confused and unable to think clearly, thus the use of Spanish becomes a practical tool.

For instance, teacher from group number one kept his own way of thinking about the previous statement.

Por la última opción cuando el estudiante no comprende nada, cuando se vuelve una restricción para las actividades que se están realizando, cuando das una indicación y te das cuenta que los estudiantes no le entendieron, por ejemplo, en los exámenes y las actividades, que se dé la indicación o hagas el task y los estudiantes no entendieron entonces para aclarar la tarea es mejor utilizar la lengua materna como última opción.

Para traducir vocabulario mínimo. (Interview, teacher # 2, May 3rd)

[As the last resort when the student does not understand anything, when it becomes a restriction for the development of a task, when you give an instruction and you realize that students did not understand, for example, in exams or activities, when the instruction is given or they do the task and students did not understand, then to clarify it is better to use the mother tongue as a last resort” (Interview, teacher # 2, May 3rd)

Most of the cases in which the teacher #2 find necessary the use of Spanish is during the development of different tasks or assessment activities in which students do not understand the instructions and he points out that the use of the mother tongue must not be overused during the classes.

Later, in another interview, a teacher explained the moments in which she considered necessary the exchange of languages.

Considero que es de vital importancia utilizar la lengua materna en casos en los que uno como profesor ve que los demás estudiantes se sienten perdidos, o no tienen la precisión frente a una palabra. (Interview, teacher # 3, May 3rd)

[I consider that it is of vital importance to use the mother tongue in cases where, as a teacher, you realize that students feel lost or do not have a completely understanding of a word.]. (Interview, teacher # 3 May 3rd)

The teacher expressed that she considers important using Spanish when students feel confused about some specific words or expressions.

CONCLUSIONS

In most EFL contexts, the use of the students’ mother tongue is regulated, mostly because it is believed that it promotes a better and more natural development of the language skills of the target language. After analyzing our lived experiences as students, we came to the conclusion that in the context where this study was developed, this is achieved by limiting the use of Spanish and, sometimes, even banning it; however, while the prohibition applies for

most of the situations in the classroom, there are some cases in which Spanish is still used. We argue that understanding the reasons why students use their mother tongue can bring great insights on its benefits and disadvantages.

In order to understand the role of Spanish in EFL classes, we decided to consider students and teachers' perspectives. Findings suggest that there were three main categories that can help explain the specific situations in which participants resort to Spanish while learning English: using Spanish to solve doubts, using Spanish to express personal opinions and feelings and the use of Spanish to understand complex concepts.

After doing the analysis of the collected findings, it was possible to fully answer the question posed, and at the same time, showcase evidence that might be helpful to see the research work from various perspectives, as well as to support the hypothesis previously proposed. In addition, these findings might be relevant for the university where this study was carried out, as they can shed some light on the understanding of this phenomenon. For instance, stakeholders could evaluate the pertinence of the ban of Spanish and create different strategies that allow the use of students' mother tongue in certain cases.

DISCUSSIONS

There are several possible reasons for the omission of the target language use, one of this might lie in students' oral production since this is one of the aspects EFL students struggle the most. This is because, in order to speak, students need to consider their pronunciation, their understanding of the grammar rules, their vocabulary, and even their accent. Thus, not being able to use their mother tongue within the classroom might affect their participation and engagement. Besides, students might not be able to express their ideas, feelings or emotions.

Similarly, both teachers and institutions reflect on the idea that it would be better to prevent the use of students' mother tongue and be strict with its use; since it is believed that the excessive use of it might delay the learning process of the target language and could often replace English, which is supposed to remain as the main language in class.

Hence, the findings of this study clearly assert the specific moments that students and teachers regard as the most convenient concerning the use of Spanish in an EFL classroom.

This project was able to determine the role of Spanish in EFL classes during different circumstances by analyzing the results obtained from the data. We found a consistent relation between what some national and international authors proposed and what we gathered from the teachers' and students' perspectives of the foreign language degree at a private university in Colombia. In addition, the categories that emerged were similar to those given by previous studies.

According to the research developed by Cuartas (2014), students feel more confident when they can use their mother tongue to clarify some aspects of the foreign language and make connections between the mother tongue and the foreign language. We realized this during the observations and interviews. Students used Spanish mainly to solve doubts and to ask for explanations because the use of English was not enough to understand what the teacher was explaining, what they have to do during the classes, or the instructions about extra activities.

In addition to the use of Spanish during the EFL classes with the aim of making the content of the class understandable, both teachers and students also used their mother tongue to translate or correct some specific words (Durán & López, 2014). Translating was one of the most common situations for which students of this inquiry used Spanish, because they felt it was necessary to know the meaning of some words in their mother tongue to understand those

specific concepts in the foreign language. Durán and López also suggest that from students and teachers' perspective the use of Spanish must be moderated.

The use of the mother tongue gives students the opportunity to express their feelings and personal opinions in a more comfortable way. In line with Barrientos et al. (2015), who state that while learning a foreign language, the use of the mother tongue usually occurs and that it constitutes an important factor that allows students to have a more significant learning of the foreign language.

In spite of these studies were executed in different contexts, including one specific research which the mother tongue was not the Spanish language but the Turkish one, it was evident that regardless of the target language that has been intended to be learned, the mother tongue becomes essential to the acquisition of it; however, all the studies suggested that there are some specific moments in which the mother tongue must not be ignored but they also stated that the excessive use of it could cause drawbacks to the learning process of students.

All in all, our findings correlate to the findings in similar studies. Most of the researches that we took as reference support our findings in terms of the similar conclusions they found.

In addition to the stated research outcomes, there were some unexpected findings that led us to reflect on the reasons behind these particular behaviors happen and to speculations that might guide the way for future researches about this same topic.

Throughout the research process, there were some realizations about the consciousness students have when using their mother tongue in English classes. On the questionnaires and interviews, students denied and showed disdain towards the frequent use of Spanish; however, during the observations, most interactions among students were addressed in Spanish.

This made us wonder about the possible reasons behind this, and whether students ignore the fact they overuse their L1 in class, or they do it on purpose since they do not feel comfortable enough to speak in English in front of their classmates, they feel afraid of being judged by their classmates with a higher language level or they just do not feel like doing it as this would take more effort and time.

Notwithstanding, this cannot be taken as a final affirmation, due to several limitations regarding the development of the different data collection methods. For instance, the research took place only in the fifth level of Integrated English, as well as the observations that took place for a short period of time; all of it could have influenced our perception.

Possible alternatives that could have allowed us to have a deeper understanding of the context would have been more time to implement the data collection methods that we used, and the implementation of other methods, such as focal groups and participative observations, as well as expanding the population with which the research was developed; it implies, to take into account all of the courses of Integrated English in order to follow the students' learning process of a foreign language and the role of Spanish.

Some possible suggestions to take into account further similar research that might take place at the university or in a similar context, could be the possibility of taking a turn in the research question and examine how the mother tongue can improve or serve as an aid to the learning of a foreign language, not only Spanish being the first language, this could be developed in any country with any other language.

This could also encompass the possible challenges that students face when learning a new language and the emotional factors that influence the learning process, which could lead to different investigations regarding the students' affective filters.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A. Cover Letter

March, 2019.

Dear professors,

We are students of the foreign language teaching program at UCO, and we are conducting a study analyzing fifth-level students and teachers' perceptions of the role of Spanish in EFL classes. The results of this study will hopefully contribute to the teaching and learning of the English language at this university.

We are interested in gathering both your experience and your students' with the aid of observations, questionnaires, and interviews which will be held during the Integrated English V classes. The previous data collection methods will be helpful to have reliable and genuine information.

We want to stress that your permission and participation in this study is crucial to accomplish the purpose of this research paper. Besides, we want to inform you that we will be taking all of the ethical requirements to protect the identity and confidential information of the participants involved.

Please read carefully and if you need any further information about the project, feel free to contact us at this email dmelisag@gmail.com

Kind regards,

Daniela Arango, Sandra Betancur, Melissa García & Esmeralda Ruiz.

Appendix B. Consent Form for Data Collection

Yo _____ identificado con la cédula de ciudadanía N° _____, acepto voluntariamente participar en el proyecto de investigación “The role of Spanish in EFL classes” cuyo objetivo es recolectar las diferentes experiencias relacionadas con el uso del español en el aprendizaje del inglés, tanto de maestros como estudiantes de la licenciatura en lenguas extranjeras de la Universidad Católica de Oriente.

Certifico que he sido informado con claridad sobre los procesos que se llevarán a cabo para la recolección de datos, tales como:

- Observaciones de un rango de duración de máximo dos horas, dentro de las clases de inglés integrado V.
- Cuestionarios relacionados con el rol del español dentro del proceso de aprendizaje del inglés, que tendrán un máximo de duración de diez minutos.
- Entrevistas acerca de mi experiencia y percepción sobre el impacto que ha tenido el español durante mi proceso de aprendizaje del inglés. La entrevista será grabada en audio con el propósito de facilitar el análisis de los datos.

Los procedimientos se llevarán a cabo en un lugar y hora convenientes que no interferirán con mis actividades académicas. Además de esto, mi participación será totalmente voluntaria, sin ninguna compensación económica, y podré retirarme del proyecto cuando lo desee sin ninguna consecuencia.

La información suministrada para dicho proyecto será leída sólo por los investigadores y su asesor y será archivada bajo seudónimos con el fin de proteger mi identidad. Asimismo, tendré la oportunidad de conocer los resultados del proyecto de investigación en el evento de socialización que se hace cada semestre en el programa de licenciatura de lenguas extranjeras de la universidad.

Si tengo alguna duda puedo contactar a los investigadores al siguiente correo electrónico: dmelisag@gmail.com

Firma del estudiante: _____ Fecha: _____

Appendix C. Sample of Survey for Students

ROL DEL ESPAÑOL EN EL APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA (Questionnaire)

Por medio del siguiente cuestionario queremos conocer sus perspectivas y opiniones con respecto al rol que tiene el español durante el proceso de aprendizaje de Inglés en los cursos de inglés integrado en el programa de Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras de la Universidad Católica de Oriente.

La información consignada en este cuestionario es confidencial y los resultados obtenidos serán usados con fines académicos como parte de un proyecto de investigación que tiene como propósito describir el rol que el español ha tenido para los estudiantes del curso inglés integrado cinco y docentes que se encuentren vinculados a la institución y que hagan parte del proceso de enseñanza del programa Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras en la Universidad Católica de Oriente.

*Obligatorio

INFORMACIÓN PERSONAL

1. Nombre Completo *

2. Elige un seudónimo *

3. Género *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- Masculino
 Femenino

4. Edad *

Perspectivas y opiniones a cerca del rol del español en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera.

5. Considera que el uso del español debería permitirse o restringirse durante las clases de inglés *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- Permitirse
 Restringirse

6. Desde su experiencia, ¿Considera que el uso del español durante las clases de inglés beneficia o perjudica su proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua inglesa? *

Marca solo un óvalo por fila.

	Mucho	A veces	Poco	En lo absoluto
Perjudica	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Beneficia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. ¿En qué situaciones específicas durante las clases de inglés ve necesario el uso del español? *

Selecciona todos los que correspondan.

- Traducción de palabras
 Expresar sentimientos
 Explicar conceptos abstractos o difíciles
 Dar instrucciones
 Explicar temas gramaticales
 Verificar comprensión de temas
 Adarar dudas
 Todas las anteriores
 Otro: _____

8. ¿Con qué frecuencia recurre al uso del español durante las clases de inglés? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- Nunca
 Casi nunca
 A veces
 Casi siempre
 Siempre

9. ¿Considera que el uso del español en las clases de inglés puede crear dependencia en su proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- En absoluto
 Un poco
 A veces
 Mucho
 Otro: _____

10. ¿Cuáles de los siguientes recursos externos usa para entender mejor la lengua extranjera inglés? *

Selecciona todos los que correspondan.

- Diccionarios (Inglés-Español)
 Diccionarios monolingües
 Traductor
 Otro: _____

11. ¿Prefiere que su profesor use español durante las clases de inglés? *

Marca solo un óvalo.

- Mucho
 A veces
 Poco
 Nunca

Appendix D. Students Interview Questions

Preguntas:

1. ¿Considera que el uso del español debería permitirse o restringirse durante las clases de inglés? ¿Por qué? (POR PARTE DEL ESTUDIANTE Y MAESTRO)
2. Desde su experiencia, ¿considera que el uso del español durante las clases de inglés beneficia o perjudica el proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera (Inglés)?
3. ¿En qué situaciones específicas durante las clases de inglés ve necesario el uso del español?
4. ¿Con qué frecuencia recurre al uso del español durante las clases de inglés?
5. ¿Considera que el uso del español en las clases de inglés puede crear dependencia en su proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera? ¿por qué?
6. ¿Qué tipo de recursos externos utiliza para entender mejor la lengua extranjera inglés?
7. ¿Le gusta o le disgusta que el docente use el español durante las clases de inglés? ¿por qué?

Appendix E. Teachers Interview Questions

Preguntas:

1. ¿Considera que el uso del español debería permitirse o restringirse durante las clases de inglés? ¿Por qué? (POR PARTE DEL ESTUDIANTE Y MAESTRO).
2. Desde su experiencia, ¿considera que el uso del español durante las clases de inglés beneficia o perjudica el proceso de aprendizaje de los estudiantes?.
3. ¿En qué situaciones específicas durante las clases de inglés ve necesario el uso del español?.
4. ¿Con qué frecuencia recurre al uso del español durante las clases de inglés?.
5. ¿Considera que el uso del español en las clases de inglés puede crear dependencia en los estudiantes? ¿Por qué?.
6. ¿Qué tipo de recursos externos les recomienda a sus estudiantes utilizar para entender mejor la lengua extranjera inglés?.
7. ¿Le gusta o le disgusta que los estudiantes usen el español durante las clases de inglés? ¿Por qué?.