

TO USE OR NOT TO USE THE MOTHER TONGUE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING?

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Abstract:

The aim of our paper is to explore the positive and negative sides of using the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages. We analyse arguments supporting the use of learners' native language as well as arguments emphasizing the importance of exclusive use of the target language in the foreign language acquisition. We carried out research among foreign language teachers at the University of Economics in Bratislava and present the findings in our paper.

Key words: mother tongue, questionnaire, research findings, positive and negative aspects

Introduction

The use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching has been the important but controversial subject of research and even nowadays it is the topic causing disagreement among language researchers and teachers. Some of them support the idea of avoiding the use of the mother tongue and suggest trying other techniques to reach the goal. The opinion of another group of researchers and teachers is that the limited and judicious use of the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages leads to better results in teaching and learning process and in some circumstances it is very productive. As the consensus over this issue has not been found yet, the authors of this paper conducted research in this field. A questionnaire was designed as the research tool and 58 teachers of foreign languages from the University of Economics in Bratislava participated in the study. The findings show that the overall attitude of language teachers towards using the students' mother tongue in the classroom is positive but at the same time the respondents emphasize the necessity to take into account the level of students' proficiency as well as the linguistic situation.

1

Arguments against using mother tongue in teaching foreign languages

Many linguists disapprove and discourage the use of mother tongue in the language classroom. It is often said that the use of mother tongue demonstrates the low level of proficiency of the teachers. The judgment on a foreign language teachers' quality is often related to their ability to conduct the lesson exclusively in the target language. For a long time the predominant use of the target language has been considered an important principle of second language learning. Avoidance of the mother tongue use was associated with good teaching during the Direct and Audio-lingual methods (Kayaoglu, 2012). The basic assumption is that "*the habits of students' are thought to interfere the students' attempt to master the target*

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language. Therefore the target language is used in the classroom, not the students' native language. A contrastive analysis between the students' native language and the target language will reveal where a teacher should expect the most interference" (Larsen-Freeman; Anderson, 2011, p. 46).

Foreign language teaching in 1970s and 1980s with the emphasis on the communicative approach did not include the usage of mother tongue and avoided its use in the language classroom. Communicative approaches to language learning considered the use of the mother tongue as undesirable.

One of the strongest opponents of mother tongue use in the language classroom has been Stephen Krashen whose theory is based on the importance of the target language input for the second language acquisition. According to this theory any reduction of this input is considered as a wasted opportunity for valuable input. Another argument against using native language in teaching foreign languages is that too much reliance on the native language may undermine the interaction in the foreign language (Krashen, 1981). According to Cook arguments for avoiding the first language in the classroom were derived from the parallel comparing acquisition of the target language to acquisition of the mother tongue with small children. The fact that monolingual L1 children do not speak another language means that L2 learners should not rely on the native language (Cook, 2008). This opinion is contradicted by Singleton and Ryan (2004) who claim that L2 learners have more mature minds, greater social development, a larger short term memory capacity and other differences from small children and therefore these differences do not support the theory that avoidance of the first language should lead to better results in language teaching.

One reason for avoidance L1 from teaching foreign languages and emphasizing as much exposure to the target language as possible, has been the dominant position of native English teachers who could not speak the language of the students as well as using strictly English textbooks. It was therefore in their interest to advocate the methodological approach of using exclusively the target language in the teaching process.

2

Arguments supporting the use of mother tongue in teaching foreign languages

Recently many arguments have appeared to contradict the avoidance of using mother tongue in teaching foreign languages stating that the use of the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages is justified and contributes to higher effectiveness of foreign language teaching. According to Mattioli *"there is an opinion that eliminating or limiting the native language doesn't appear to guarantee better acquisition nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities."* (Mattioli, 2004, p. 24). In the last years the attitude to using the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages has undergone a positive change and it emphasizes its importance for better understanding of the target language. The BBC teaching English website published the findings of the research carried out among 641 teachers voting on the use of mother tongue in the English classroom. The findings reveal the following: 21% of respondents use only English, 58% of respondents sometimes use mother tongue, 8% frequently, 7%-most of the time, 6%-about half the time (Kavaliauskienė, 2009). And yet, as Wiwczarowski notes in several publications, success in using English today is often found in communication which involves individuals who are not always from a single culture. He notes how this is "a

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complex process (2005)", requiring "needs-driven social interaction (2004)", which is grounded in "high level, culturally correct and marketable...knowledge transfer (2003)." Wiwczaroski further argues that competency is the key goal to be pursued, and to achieve competency, a student must receive targeted instruction – which may have to occur in the mother tongue.

The main areas where the mother tongue is present in the English classroom are according to Wharton following:

- **providing L1 equivalents of English words and expressions** where the reasons are mostly eliciting vocabulary, checking for comprehension, memorizing new vocabulary, while L1 equivalents are given alongside L2 words
- **using L1 to focus on language in use**, which is the technique typical for the grammar translation method used especially with students at early levels. According to Atkinson "*translation from students' mother tongue into English enables them to focus on accuracy and differences between two texts.*" (Atkinson, 1987, p. 244).
- **using L1 for classroom interaction**, which is necessary at very low levels if the tasks are too complicated to explain (Wharton, 2007).

Cole (2001) also supports the use of the mother tongue in the language classroom and substantiates this opinion by giving these reasons:

- increased efficiency
- facilitated learning
- naturalness resulting in higher comfort of students about some functions and topics
- external relevance - the use of both languages will help students master L2 uses they may need in external environment.

Butzkamm (2003) in his critical approach towards monolingualism in teaching foreign languages argues that textbook illustrations, visual aids and careful selection of words and structures facilitate a monolingual approach but can often lead to misunderstanding and can prevent students from making the right kind of association with mother tongue equivalent. Results of studies which aimed at checking understanding at the end of the lesson have shown that pupils misunderstood more than teachers realised. He also mentions that a foreign language friendly atmosphere is best achieved through specific use of mother tongue. Mother tongue can promote authentic communication as students react more spontaneously if they know that they are not restricted with the limitations of their language proficiency. Avoidance of L1 seriously constrains the choice of teaching material because it doesn't allow to use richer, more authentic texts which may be difficult for students to understand. Butzkamm emphasizes that to achieve the optimal teaching results the native language should be used selectively and in judicious amount and the teachers shouldn't resort to the mother tongue because they are less skilled and proficient and it is easier for them to conduct the lesson in their mother tongue.

Findings of the research carried out among the teachers of foreign languages at the University of Economics in Bratislava

Aim of the research

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The aim of the research was to examine foreign language teachers' attitude to using mother tongue in foreign language teaching at the University of Economics in Bratislava. Teachers who participated in this research teach the students who major in English, German, French or Spanish, or they teach those who study at the study programme Foreign Languages and the Intercultural Communication at the Faculty of Applied Languages or they teach the language for specific purposes at five faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava. This study analyses teachers' attitudes, opinions and ideas concerning the use of mother tongue in the foreign language teaching. Findings exemplify more precisely the situations in which teachers feel that the use of mother tongue is appropriate and helps the learning and teaching process. We hope the results of our study will contribute to finding the right answers to this current and up to date issue.

Findings of the research

Findings of the research show that 47% of the participants teach English, 29% teach German, 9 % teach French, 7% teach Spanish, 5% teach Russian and 3% of teachers teach Italian.

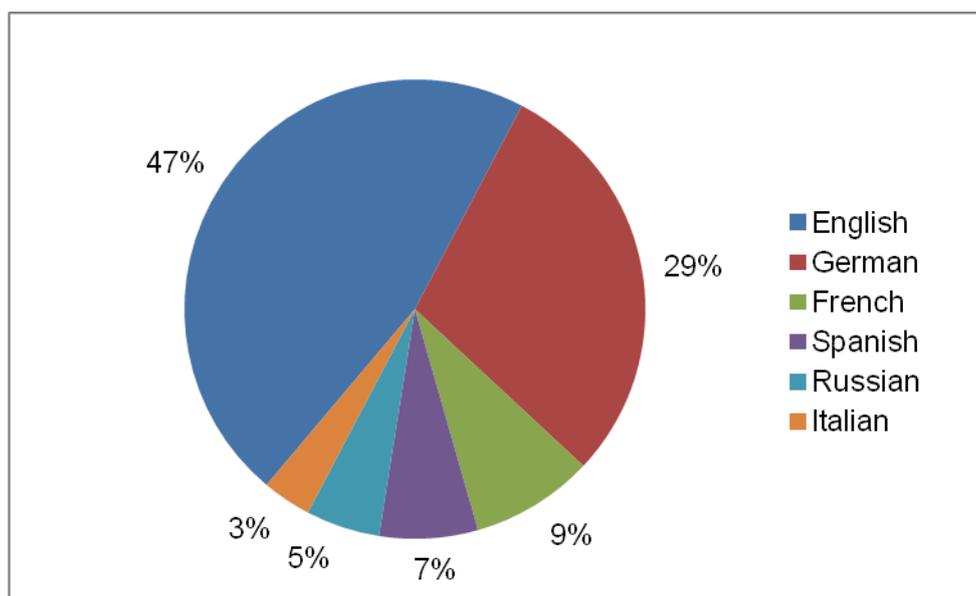


Figure 1. Percentage share of foreign language teachers

Our research aimed at finding the answers to the key issue whether the teachers use Slovak as their mother tongue in teaching foreign languages. In our study we divided teachers in two groups. The first group was represented by 43 respondents who teach foreign languages for specific purposes at 5 faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava and the second group consisted of 15 teachers who teach foreign languages at the Faculty of Applied Languages, the study programme Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication. We asked the teachers whether they use Slovak in the teaching process and the answers are as follows: The figures in the first group for "yes" are quite high, 37 respondents (86%) give positive answer and only 6 teachers (14 %) find the use of the mother tongue unacceptable. The results in the second group are slightly different as 67% (10 teachers) are in

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favour of using Slovak in the classroom and just 33 % (5 respondents) are against it. Lower numbers of teachers using the mother tongue may be influenced by the different situation in the study programme where students are supposed to have mastered the foreign language on more advanced level. The results in both groups show generally positive attitude of foreign language teachers towards using Slovak in foreign language classrooms which can bring pragmatic and practical benefits. The figure 2 shows responses of two groups of teachers:

1st group: 43 respondents teaching at 5 faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava

2nd group: 15 respondents teaching at the Faculty of Applied Languages, the study programme Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication

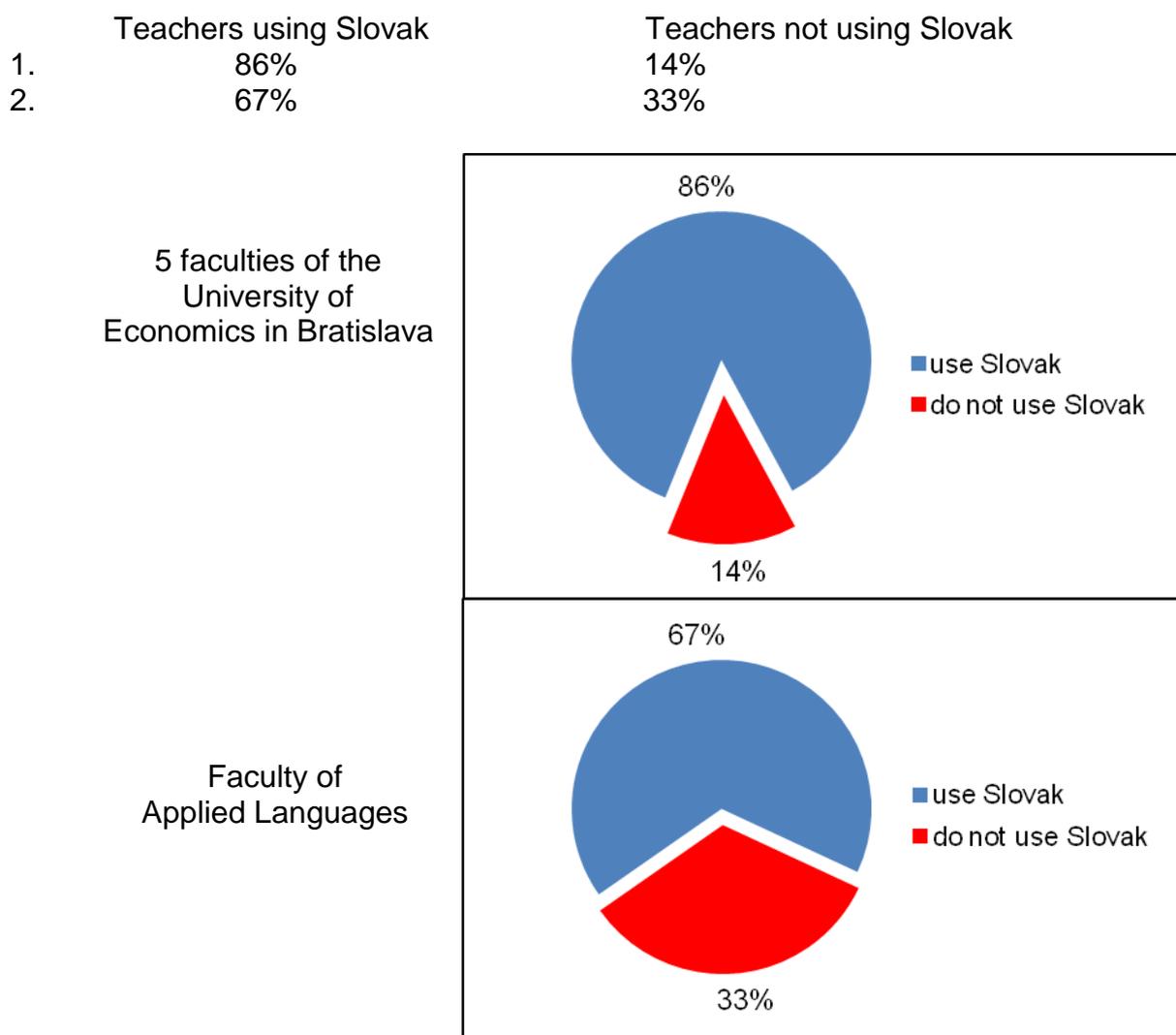


Figure 2. Comparison of using Slovak between respondents teaching at 5 faculties of the University of Economics and the Faculty of Applied Languages

Our research also aimed at specifying the areas in which the teachers who responded positively in the previous question consider using mother tongue as the appropriate methodological tool. The answers were given by 37 respondents who teach foreign languages at 5 faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava and 10 respondents who teach at the Faculty of Applied Languages, the study

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programme Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication. They could choose more than one option and their reasons are sequenced according to the highest frequency. Respondents from the first group reported they use Slovak mainly when teaching difficult linguistic phenomena (81%), followed by business vocabulary (70%), general vocabulary (27%) and 11% of teachers use Slovak in other areas. Respondents from the second group stated the use of Slovak when teaching difficult linguistic phenomena (60%), followed by business vocabulary (50%), general vocabulary (10 %) and 40% of teachers use Slovak in other areas which are specified below:

- instructions in tests and exercises
- explanations of linguistic phenomena with different level of difficulty (students do not understand grammar and ask for explanation in Slovak)
- in case students do not react to anecdotes (students do not understand different genres)
- translation seminars.

	Difficult linguistic phenomena	business vocabulary	general vocabulary	other
1.	81%	70%	27%	11%
2.	60%	50%	10%	40%

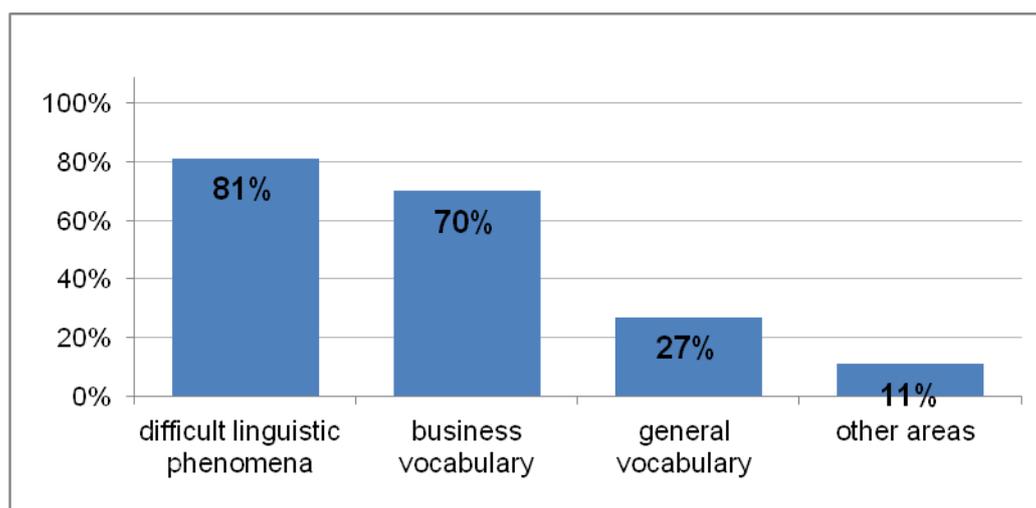


Figure 3. Areas in which Slovak is used by teachers at 5 faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava

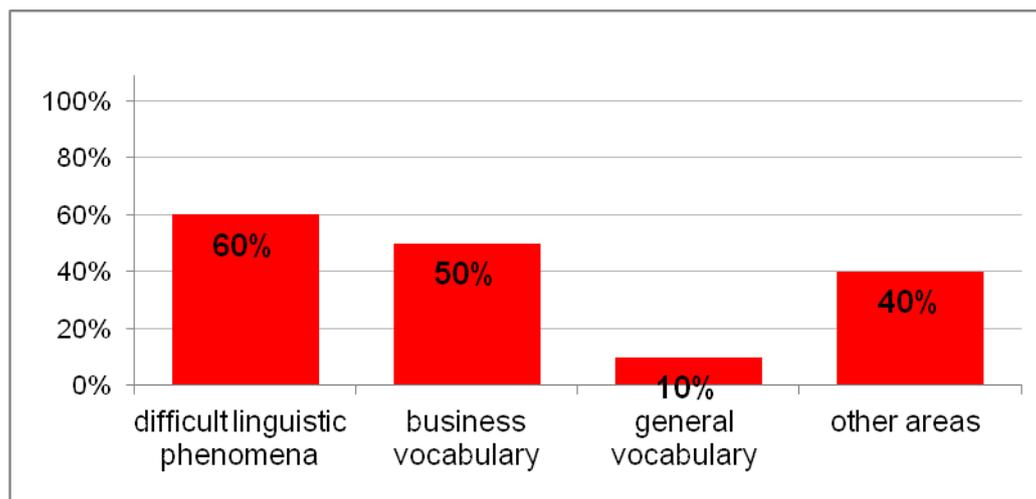


Figure 4. Areas in which Slovak is used by teachers at the Faculty of Applied Languages

Our study also aimed at finding out the reasons why teachers decided to use the mother tongue as the appropriate methodological tool in foreign language teaching. The respondents were asked to specify most common reasons for using Slovak in the teaching process. In the answer to this question teachers could choose more than one reason and their answers are sequenced according to the importance given to each of them. Teachers from the first group stated as the most common reason the comprehension of difficult grammatical phenomena, next reason was non homogeneous study groups, followed by comprehension of business vocabulary, interference, comprehension of abstract words, lack of time and 3% of them reported also other reasons. Respondents from the second group reported as the most important reasons comprehension of business vocabulary, difficult grammatical phenomena, comprehension of abstract words followed by interference, non homogeneous study groups, other reasons and no respondent reported lack of time.

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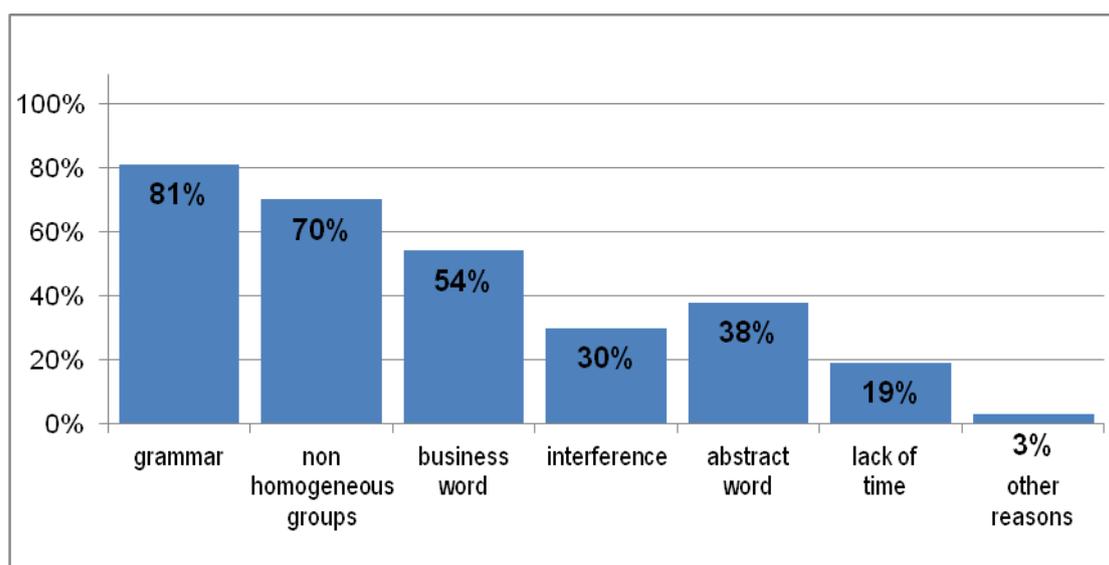


Figure 5. Reasons for using Slovak by teachers at 5 faculties of the University of Economics in Bratislava

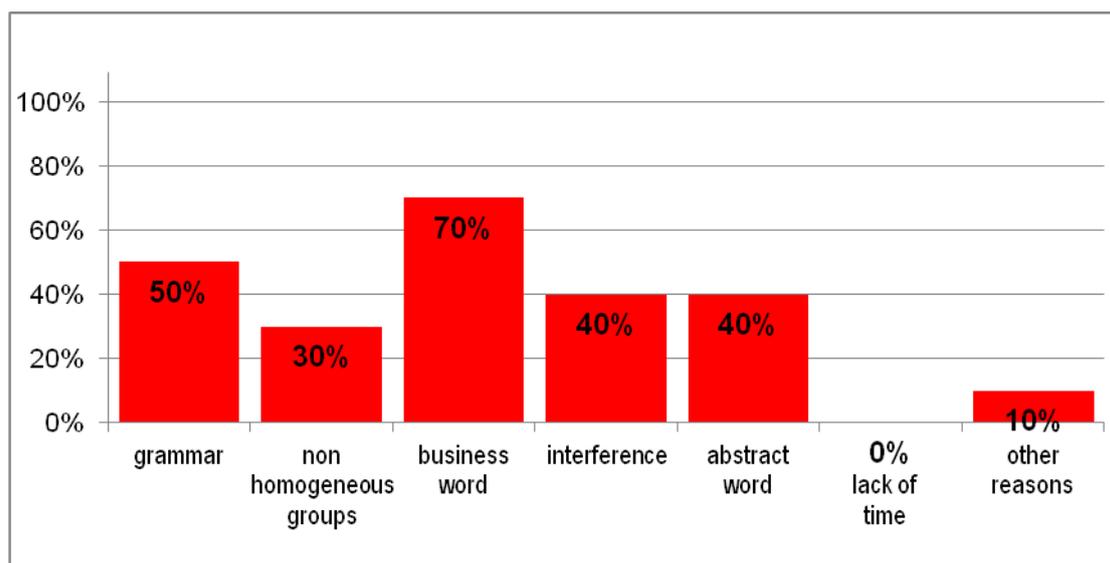


Figure 6. Reasons for using Slovak by teachers at the Faculty of Applied Languages

Conclusion

“The decision to use the L1 reflects a variety of factors and multiple goals. The questions of when and where the L1 should be used, how much it is to be used and whether the use of L1 is a hindrance or a help in L2 acquisition cannot adequately be answered without reference to sociological, psychological, pedagogic and linguistic dimensions of the issue. The quantity of L1 use and the way it is used is inseparably linked to the underlying function or purpose of the program and the teacher” (Kayaoglu 2012, p. 34). Teachers, with their own pedagogic values, experience and aims should critically analyze their teaching situation and make well-informed, realistic decisions about the use of the mother tongue.

Arguments against the use of the mother tongue in teaching foreign languages are nowadays more and more opposed by methodologists who claim that this opinion should be re-examined because there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that restricting mother tongue use would necessarily improve learning efficiency.

Our paper describes the findings of research carried out at the University of Economics in Bratislava, the Faculty of Applied Linguistics and presents the results of the survey of teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of using mother tongue in foreign language teaching. Results suggest that a judicious use may present the opportunities for equipping the learners with explicit knowledge of the target language systems. Teachers also expressed the opinion that the amount of native language depends on the students’ proficiency and linguistic situation.

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