

The controversial issue of using L1 with L2 In efl homogeneous classrooms

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Abstract:

For decades, research has encouraged English as foreign language (EFL) teachers not to use any language but English in their classrooms.

Besides, many English language teaching professionals claim L1 use in the classroom is unthinkable, something that should never happen in today's modern, communicative lessons.

They wonder how students can truly appreciate meaningful target language exchanges if they are continually relying on their L1.

This paper makes no pretention whatsoever to the presentation of this issue apart from putting forward the controversial use of L1 with L2 in EFL classrooms to teachers and student.

However, it displays the gaining ground trends of advocates for this issue. Accordingly, it would shed light on a practical task putting forward such questions: are we to use L1 when teaching English? What are the positive and negative effects from using L1 in EFL classrooms?

الملخص:

شجعت البحوث لتعليم اللغة الأجنبية لعدة عقود الملقنين على عدم استعمال اللغة الأم في الأقسام وهذا حرصا منهم على تركيز المتعلم على اللغة الهدف فقط لتفادي الخلط في المفاهيم والمعاني على حساب اللغة المرجع.

فالمراد من هذا المقال هو توضيح هذه المعضلة وإبراز مناصريها ومناهضيها وأهدافهم و من تمّ طرح إشكالية استعمال اللغة الأم في تعليم اللغة الهدف مع طرح سؤاليين هامين:

- هل يجب علينا استعمال اللغة الأم في أقسام تعليم اللغة الأجنبية؟
- ما هي النتائج الإيجابية والسلبية من إتباع هذه المنهجية؟

Introduction

This paper will endeavour to show proponents and opponents of the crucial issue of using L1 with L2 in EFL classrooms, presenting evidence from research into L1 use in classrooms around the world, as well as evidence of the importance of creating an English haven in a linguistically homogeneous classroom.

The lesson is about to begin. The teacher enters, approaches the desk, takes out books and papers then turns to the board to write a preliminary pair-work prompt. He hears the hum, the chatter, all the while pretending not to pay attention, not acknowledging what is going on, smiling to himself. He understands, yet chooses not to join in. After all, the students are speaking their L1 and this is an English lesson. Accordingly, this would be the normal setting, an English class, with a teacher of English.

For many years, research has encouraged EFL teachers not to use any language but English in their classrooms. As a matter of fact, if students are not motivated to use English in the classroom, or are pressured by peers to follow a hidden set of classroom rules that includes interacting in the students' native language, then techniques to compel students to English can become novelties for the students, ones that will likely wane in their effect quickly. Most teachers tend to have opinions about native language use, depending largely on the way in which they have been trained and, in some cases, on their own language education. They bring these opinions, and the manifestation of them to the profession and therefore to the classroom.

Brief Literature Review

The mother tongue in EFL learning has taken different swings depending on which theoretical framework was in vogue at any one particular time. While direct methods in the first half of the twentieth century saw no place whatsoever for the first language L1(1) in the classroom, the grammar-translation method(2) used the mother-tongue so extensively and at the expense of target language L2 practice that, even today translation is in many instances regarded as an illegitimate practice because of its associations with this method.

In the fifties and sixties Behaviourist and Contrastive Analysis proponents saw the first language as central in language learning but mainly as a source of interference with the development of habits in L2. In the sixties Chomsky's *innatist*(3) views downplayed the centrality of the mother tongue but considered it interfered with the learner's *inner* Language Acquisition Device(4).

In the seventies Interlanguage Theory(5) also assigned a negative effect to the first language in that it may interfere or disrupt a naturally predetermined acquisition process. Advocates of the Monitor Model (6) saw no place for L1 use in the classroom but asserted that L1 subject-matter instruction can facilitate L2 acquisition in making L2 input more comprehensible.

In the early eighties Interactionists(7), primarily concerned with *negotiation of meaning*, assigned no apparent role to the use of L1 and early communicative language teaching in the mid eighties tended to adopt an English-only approach to language teaching. It was with the

emergence of studies on the role of form focused instruction that more positive attitudes towards the pedagogic use of the mother tongue started to appear. The role of the mother tongue in EFL Learning has been the subject of much debate and controversy.

The Controversy

Throughout much of the history of research into ESL/EFL, the role of learners' first language (L1) has been a hotly debated issue. Many views put forward are but mere reflections of the different methodological shifts in English Language Teaching, which have brought about new and different outlooks on the role of the mother tongue.

Actually, many English language teaching professionals claim L1 use in the classroom is unthinkable, something that should never happen in today's modern communicative lessons. They wonder how students can truly appreciate meaningful target language exchanges if they are continually relying on their L1. On the other hand, a good number of teachers feel, partly based on their own experiences, as learners of foreign language, that the mother tongue has an active and beneficial role to play in instructed foreign language acquisition/learning.

Proponents: Half-way Solution?

In the literature, an increasing number of teacher-researchers stress the growing methodological need in EFL for a principled, systematic and judicious way of using the mother tongue in the classroom. And yet, for some of us, there seems to be a generalised

feeling of guilt that we are acting counter to the principles of good teaching when we use the learners' mother tongue as a tool to facilitate learning.

There are, however, a considerable number of advocates of Atkinson's (1993) judicious use theory which fosters the belief that, "teachers should use English where possible, and L1 when necessary", those who say that perhaps the teacher and students can exchange in the L1 without harming the communicative focus of foreign language lessons. These advocates claim that "the L1 can be a vital resource, and there is certainly no reason why any teacher of monolingual classes should feel that it is somehow 'wrong' to make use of it (Atkinson 1993, 13). (8) "

In Brown's (2001, 180) discussion on group work, for example, he points out that teachers are often reluctant to use L1 in class because they feel that "students in small groups will covertly use their native language. (9). The choice of the word, covertly, clearly suggests that some teachers perceive these exchanges as taboo.

Schweers (1999) conducts a study with EFL students and their teachers in a Spanish context to investigate their attitude towards using L1 in the L2 classroom. His results indicate that the majority of students and teachers agreed that "Spanish Should be used in the EFL classroom" (10).

Auerbach (1993) not only acknowledges the positive role of L1 in the classroom, but also identifies the following uses for it: classroom management, language analysis, presenting rules that

govern grammar, discussing cross cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors, and checking for comprehension (11).

Rinvoluceri is a strong and very convincing advocate of the use of L1 in L2 learning. He believes that by “rejecting students’ mother tongue, we reject the use of a whole set of strategies and resources” (12). Using L1 to learn L2 is natural- like learning anything else, we start with something we already know, with something familiar to us. In the case of L2 learning, it is only natural to start off by referring to L1.

As a matter of fact, Cook (1992) reminded teachers that “whether they want it to be there or not, the L1 is ever present in their L2 learners” (13).

So broadly speaking, there is an abundance of literature which advocates the use of L1 in the classroom or suggests that it can be productive or may even be necessary at times (see, for example, Rinvoluceri 2001, Stevick 1990, Ellis 1988, Atkinson 1987, Bolitho 1983 and Rivers 1978).

Opponents: Fierce or Strategic Opposition?

Prodromou (2002) carried out research into the perceptions of 300 Greek students regarding L1 use in the monolingual classroom at three levels – beginner, intermediate and advanced.

A relatively high percentage of beginner and intermediate students (between 53% and 66%) answered that both the teacher and the students ‘should use the mother tongue’, while only a minority of advanced learners supported those views. This contrasts with the

students' opinions concerning the use of L1 in specific classroom situations (i.e. giving instructions, explaining grammar and so on). Here L1 use receives a small amount of support from the different level groups. Prodromou concludes that his study presents a clear pattern: "the more English students learn, the less reliant they are on the L1" (14), and that, on the whole, his students seem to have a negative opinion of L1 use in the classroom.

Proponents of the monolingual approach argue that the target language ought to be the sole medium of communication, implying the prohibition of the L1 would maximize the effectiveness of learning L2. For that, Krashen (1981) has suggested that people learning foreign languages "follow basically the same route as they acquire their mother tongue; hence the use of the mother tongue in the learning process should be minimized" (15).

They all agree that used in excess by the students, L1 can become a crutch in the classroom and impede the learner's performance in learning the L2. However, students who enjoy the foreign language experience understand that their improvement in the L2 depends on the amount that they use the L2 both inside and outside the classroom. Students who take advantage of the opportunity to speak English progress quickly, regardless if some limited L1 is used in their class. If a student puts forth the time and effort to learn the language he or she will be successful. Therefore let us consider the following spectrum.

At one end, there are those who reject the use of L1 altogether or fail to recognize any significant potential in it; at the other, there are those who either massively overuse it themselves or are willing to accept such overuses from those they teach.

Conclusion

In this paper our intention is not to go through all the arguments for and against L1 use that exist but rather to proceed from the assumption neatly put forward that the best solution is to make limited use of students' native language at appropriate times and in appropriate places. However, we do feel strongly that the L1 should not be used as an optional 'spice'. It is much more basic than that; it is something that every learner in every classroom possesses; and we believe that we, as teachers, need to be clear in our minds, not about whether it should be used (by us, by learners, or by both), because whether we like it or not, it will be anyway, on the spur of the moment and on the spot.

Endnotes:

1. L1: This is also a predominant crucial issue of deciding upon what the L1: Sometimes the term first language is used for the language that the speaker speaks best (his second language then being the language he speaks less well than his first language, etc). Sometimes the terms first language, second language and third language are used to indicate various levels of skill in a language, so that it can be said that a person knows more than one language at first or second language level. Sometimes the term native language is used

to indicate a language that a person is as proficient in as a native inhabitant of that language's base country, or as proficient as the average person who speaks no other language but that language. Sometimes the term mother tongue or mother language is used for the language that a person learnt at home (usually from his parents). Children growing up in bilingual homes can according to this definition have more than one mother tongue.

2. The grammar-translation method of foreign language teaching is one of the most traditional methods, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was originally used to teach 'dead' languages (and literatures) such as Latin and Greek, and this may account for its heavy bias towards written work to the virtual exclusion of oral production. Indeed, the emphasis on achieving 'correct' grammar with little regard for the free application and production of speech is at once the greatest asset and greatest drawback to this approach.

3. Noam Chomsky's innatism is that at least a part of human knowledge consists in cognitive predispositions, which are triggered and developed by the environment, but not determined by it. Parallels can then be drawn, on a purely speculative level, between our moral faculties and language. The environment is too variable and indeterminate, according to Chomsky, to explain the extraordinary ability to learn complex concepts possessed by very young children. It follows that humans must be born with a universal innate grammar, which is determinate and has a highly organized directive component,

and enables the language learner to ascertain and categorize language heard into a system. Noam Chomsky cites as evidence for this theory the apparent invariability of human languages at a fundamental level. In this way, linguistics has provided a window into the human mind, and has established scientifically theories of innateness which were previously merely speculative.

4. The Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is a postulated "organ" of the brain that is supposed to function as a congenital device for learning symbolic language (i.e., language acquisition). First proposed by Noam Chomsky, the LAD concept is a component of the nativist theory of language which dominates contemporary formal linguistics, which asserts that humans are born with the instinct or "innate facility" for acquiring language. Chomsky motivated the LAD hypothesis by what he perceived as intractable complexity of language acquisition, citing the notion of "infinite use of finite means" proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt. At the time it was conceived (1957–1965), the LAD concept was in strict contrast to B.F. Skinner's behavioral psychology which emphasized principles of learning theory such as classical and operant conditioning and imitation over biological predisposition.

5. Interlanguage is based on the theory that there is a "psychological structure latent in the brain" which is activated when one attempts to learn a second language. Larry Selinker proposed the theory of Interlanguage in 1972, noting that in a given situation the utterances produced by the learner are different from those native

speakers would produce had they attempted to convey the same meaning. This comparison reveals a separate linguistic system. This system can be observed when studying the utterances of the learners who attempt to produce a target language norm. Learning L2 is a gradual process from L1 towards L2. At every stage of learning learners have rules of grammar which are not perfect yet, but they are not L1 rules (they are something between). In other words the learner creates a structured system of language at any stage in his development (i.e. Interlanguage). Each system is gradually revised, it evolves, and the rules become more and more complex. It means the learner travels along the Interlanguage continuum towards L2 (L1 being the starting point of the development).

6. Monitor Theory is one of five hypotheses developed by the linguist Stephen Krashen to explain second language acquisition (SLA). These comprise:

- the acquisition-learning hypothesis;
- the monitor hypothesis; where 'conscious learning ... can only be used as a Monitor or an editor' (Krashen & Terrell 1983)
- the natural order hypothesis;
- the Input Hypothesis;
- the affective filter hypothesis.

7. Interactionists see language as a rule-governed cultural activity learned in interaction with others. They believe environmental factors are more dominant in language acquisition. Vygotsky, a

psychologist and social constructivist, laid the foundation for the interactionists' view of language acquisition.

According to Vygotsky, social interaction plays an important role in the learning process and proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction. Interactionists acknowledge the importance of two-way communication in the target language (Ariza and Hancock, 2003). Long investigates conversations between a native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) and proposes his interaction hypothesis as follows: Negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways.

Negotiation of meaning leads to modified interaction, which consists of various modifications that native speakers or other interlocutors make in order to render their input comprehensible to learners. For example, native speakers in a conversation with non-native speakers often slow their speech down, speaking more deliberately.

8. Atkinson's (1993) judicious use theory, those who say that perhaps the teacher and students can exchange in the L1 without harming the communicative focus of second language (L2) lessons. These advocates claim that "the L1 can be a vital resource, and there is certainly no reason why any teacher of monolingual classes should

feel that it is somehow ‘wrong’ to make use of it” (Atkinson 1993, 13).

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