

# RETHINKING THE USE OF L1 IN L2 CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

Using mother tongue (L1) in a foreign language (L2) classrooms is inevitable. Despite the debate over the adequacy of using L1 in the teaching of L2, this paper argues using L1 in the classroom does not hinder learning, and that L1 has a facilitating role to play in the classroom and can help L2 learning and acquisition. This paper shows that L1 is an inseparable part of language teaching, and it has several functions for both the students and teachers in English language learning and teaching. Therefore, those who believe L1 has a minimal role to play in the teaching of a foreign language are invited to think again of its role and contributions it makes to the fields of language learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** *Mother tongue; foreign language; language learning; language teaching*

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in language pedagogy has caused many English teachers and instructors worldwide to disregard the use of learners' mother tongue (L1) in teaching English. CLT, also referred to as the Communicative Approach, strongly advocates that "the target language system is learned through the process of struggling to communicate" (Brown, 1994, p. 45). Some proponents of this approach also believe that "L1 use actually interfered with L2 learning and brought about "error transference" (Pacek, 2003, as cited in Miles, 2004, p. 9), and thus, hampering language acquisition and learning. The approach, however, has also brought about a serious and long-standing debate

about whether learners' mother tongue can be used when they are learning a second or foreign language (L2). While the proponents of the Communicative Approach firmly argue that the use of L1 may hinder L2 learning, its opponents claim that the use of L1 can actually facilitate the acquisition of L2 (Schweers, 1999). Some other researchers, however, take a more neutral standing by saying that mother-tongue use should not be banned, nor be encouraged. In the author's point of view, an appropriate use of L1 in an L2 learning classroom can be beneficial and does not obstruct L2 learning. In fact, the careful use of L1 can facilitate L2 learning because it has a number of benefits.

### ADVANTAGES OF L1 USE IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

While many teachers and heads of department prohibit the use of L1 in language learning contexts on the grounds that an English-only environment actively promotes communication in English, there are also good reasons for using L1 in L2 classrooms. First, EFL or ESL learners, especially low proficiency ones, can utter more clear and effective expressions their L1 (Atkinson, 1987 as cited in Wharton, 2004). Many confusions and communication breakdown in a monolingual language classroom occur due to a teacher's strict adherence to L2-only policy. For learners with limited L2 proficiency, this situation can be restraining since they are unable to express themselves very well. They may have difficulty understanding a concept, but fear of being reprimanded for using their L1 to show their confusion prevents them from speaking up. In this case, teachers themselves will find it difficult to determine whether learners have fully understood the introduced concepts. In contrast, when L1 use is allowed, learners will feel more secured to "... express themselves, [and] teachers can diagnose what has been learned, what remains to be taught and which students need further assistance" (Benson, 2004, p. 3). According to Auerbach (1993, p. 13), the integration of L1 into L2 classroom improved classroom dynamics as it "... provides a sense of security and validates the learner's lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves". Ghorbani (2012) supports this notion, stating, "Creating a sense of security and bridging from the familiar to unfamiliar are the responsibilities of L1 in the classroom. ... this role has been

heightened to a point where some sessions of the class can be devoted to learners to express their feelings in their native language” (p. 65-66). Further, Shamash (1990, as cited in Auerbach, 1993), in teaching ESL students at the Invergarry Learning Center, provided an example case of how his ELLs could benefit when they were allowed to work using their L1. In assigning a writing assignment, he prompted the learners to start by writing about themselves in their L1 or a mixture of their L1 and English before getting the texts translated into English by more proficient English speakers. He describes such approach as “a natural bridge for overcoming problems of vocabulary, sentence structure and language confidence.” Thus, as stated by Bowles and Seedhouse (2007), “One of the key pedagogic goals of classroom... is to allow learners to express themselves clearly” (p. 126), and by letting them explain ideas or make inquiry in their L1, teachers have shown their commitment to reach the objective.

Second, using L1 can stimulate collaborative dialogue among L2 learners in classes. Collaborative dialogue, according to Swain (2000, as cited in Vanderheijden, 2010, p. 29), occurs when learners are producing utterances and responding to their partners as they work together to solve a language task. In collaborative dialogue, learners are engaged in exchanging information with their partners or teachers to clarify meaning and develop an understanding of a given linguistic task. More specifically, in collaborative interaction, they “discuss how to approach specific problems, and build upon one another’s partial solutions” (Yough, 2010, p. 29). In this interaction, EFL or ESL learners will usually have conversations in their L1 discussing the task’s important elements, such as an appropriate word choice and register, before performing it. In this case, learners could compare and contrast their responses in order to get a better understanding of the L2. In other words, L1 functions as a means for them “to control interactive discourse with one another, which supports L2 production” (Williams, 2010, p. 24), which eventually leads them to the mastery of the target language. During the discussion, L1 use is especially valuable since it “... provides scaffolding for the students to help each other” (Cook, 2001, as cited in Gomathi & Kiruthika, 2013, p. 25) and “... acts as a critical psychological tool that enables learners to construct

effective collaborative dialogue in the completion of meaning-based language tasks by performing” (Cook, 2001, as cited in Vanderheijden, 2010, p. 7). In their study on the importance of L1 in ESL class, Antón and DiCamilla (1999) concluded that “to prohibit the use of L1 in the classroom situations... removes, in effect, two powerful tools for learning: the L1 and effective collaboration” (as cited in Yough, 2010, p. 29). Similarly, in an attempt to investigate the use of L1 in mediating Malaysian EFL learners’ understanding of the English tense, Harun, Massari, and Behak (2014) reported that L1 use allowed learners to discover and to understand the L2 grammatical concept. Their findings were in line with the Vygotskian view: language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a psychological tool in developing an individual’s cognitive process. Furthermore, in a qualitative study on the role of L1 in French and Spanish L2 classes, Scott and Fuente (2008) highlighted that in the group where the learners were allowed to use the L1, in contrast to the one where the learners were required to use the L2, there was “continuous interaction; few pauses, balanced contribution to interaction, ample evidence of collaborative dialogue, [and] use of metalinguistic terminology” (p. 106).

Third, L1 use can save classroom time. Harbord (1992, as cited in Miles, 2004, p. 14) states that the use of L1 saves time and avoids confusion and this is, “Perhaps[,] the biggest reason for using L1 in the classroom”. When a teacher is trying to introduce and confirm the meaning of new vocabulary, for instance, using learners’ L1 might save time and effort. Garcia (2007, as cited in Hidayati 2012) highlighted the importance of the teacher’s use of L1 in breaking communication barriers, emphasizing key ideas, and managing the classroom in order to save time. Correspondingly, Tang (2002) in his investigation on teachers and learners’ perception on Chinese L1 use in English L2 classroom, conducted a study in eighteen Chinese schools and reported that L1 was predominantly used in the classroom to explain the meaning of new vocabulary, and partially to highlight grammar points. The Chinese teachers based their practice on the belief that the use of L1 saved class time and was more efficient. Likewise, Zakaria (2013) remarked

how letting his English L2 learners use their L1 helped him save time in his class, stating:

When I taught English in my country (Indonesia), I always tried not to use my students' mother tongue during the teaching/learning process especially when facilitating speaking activities. However, I also had to end up using students' L1 when I explained students' errors, grammatical rules, and meaning of difficult words. If I insisted using L2, students seemed not to be receptive and enthusiastic to our classroom activities. Based on this experience, I believe, in these particular cases, L1 will aid students' comprehension and save time for both students and teacher. I am convinced that L1 is an effective tool to help students understand L2 more comprehensibly in non-threatening ways. When I was learning English myself, my first language helped me learn complicated linguistic features or difficult words more comprehensively in a fast manner (pp. 380-381).

In a similar tone, Al-Buraiki (2008, as cited in Al Sharaeai, 2012) found that the majority of the teachers who provide task direction and explanation in their learners' L1 agreed that using L1 could accelerate L2 learning and improve learners' linguistic competence as well. Using L1, those teachers argued, could save valuable time in explaining key ideas that otherwise would take a lot more time if explained in L2.

Fourth, while the limited exposure to L2 outside of classroom in EFL learning setting has been used as a reason to expose the learners only with English L2 in class (Wharton, 2004), the use of English only in an EFL setting is far from being authentic. As opposed to an ESL context, where "the process of acquiring an additional language [occurs] within the context of a language community which dominantly includes members who speak it natively" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 204), English L2 learned in an EFL setting "... is not widely used in the community" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 217) and, therefore, hardly has any immediate association with the L2 speaking community. Forman (2010) mentions that "in many EFL contexts, students do share a first language (and culture) with each other and their teacher, and bilingual teaching in fact operates as a default mode" (p. 56). In a study on the use of Bahasa Indonesia L1 in EFL classroom, Hidayati (2012) found that the majority of the EFL learners believed that the use of their L1 was needed in their learning. Further, in a study on the use of translation in EFL learning context,

Heltai (1989, as cited in Wharton, 2004) found that, in learners' real life use of English L2, they were often faced with the task of converting texts or statements in L1 into English L2. He, then, conclusively insisted that, while language teachers had been too reliant on the use of translation in the past that their lessons were too form-focused, dull and unproductive, appropriate use of translation could actually motivate high-proficiency EFL learners; in fact, it allowed the learners to understand the distinction between their L1 and L2. Wharton (2004) also supported this finding, stating:

A few examples immediately come to mind from my own advanced classes this year where students have been asked to translate restaurant menus, company brochures, and even letters from African children to their Japanese sponsors. Others have also been asked to be interpreters for foreign guests and visiting dignitaries. It is truly an unavoidable fact of the EFL context (p. 15).

Additionally, in supporting the use of Korean L1 in the EFL context, Williams (2010) believed that his Korean learners' L1 played a significant role in L2 classroom, especially when learners were tasked to work in pairs to complete an oral assignment. Thus, when allowing an L1 use in an English L2 classroom, a language teacher should make a well-grounded decision as to when and why it can be used. As stated by Clanfield and Foord (2000, as cited in Zakaria, 2013, p. 383), "if a teacher can do this, the classroom will probably be more authentic in regard to reflection of 'the natural interplay of L1 and L2'." Leaving out L1 will raise "input modification (e.g. repetition, speaking more slowly, substituting basic words for more complex ones, simplifying syntax, etc.)" which negatively impacts interactions and eventually creates "less realistic" conversation (Macaro, 2001, as cited in Mart, 2013, p. 10). Perhaps, the 'inauthenticity' of imposing an English-only policy in a classroom is best summed up by Stern (1992, as cited in Mart, 2013, p. 9), who believed that teachers who tried to fend off L1 from L2 classroom are fighting a losing battle because "the L1-L2 connection is an undisputable fact of life; whether we like it or not the new knowledge is learnt on the basis of the previously acquired language."

Last but not least, L1 use can help a teacher explain or clarify concepts, tasks, assignments, instructions, or activities more clearly. If using the learners' L1 enables a teacher to describe these necessities better, L1 should not be avoided. This is particularly true because "... it is more important for students to understand a concept than it is for that concept to be explained exclusively in English" (Schweers, 1999, p. 9). EFL or ESL learners can surely perform more effectively in the classroom if they clearly understand what their teachers instruct them to do. In this regard, Yough (2010) states that:

... L1 use is appropriate in making explanations of assignments and activities clear. A student who is using all of her or his available cognitive resources to understand the method of the assignment may not have the capacity to also address the purpose of the assignment. In other words, a student who fully comprehends the expectations is free to focus on the task at hand (p. 30).

In a similar vein Cook (2001) (as cited in Al Sharaeai, 2012, p. 9), L1 can be an alternative for teachers in dealing with such scenarios as "explaining and checking meaning; explaining and teaching grammar; class management; explaining class activities and tasks; and maintaining contact with the students". Further, Cook (2001) also adds that a teacher should resort to learners' L1 "to provide a short-cut for giving instructions and explanations where the cost of the L2 is too great" (as cited in Mart, 2013, p. 11) in order to make sure that they completely comprehend directions and lessons. Similarly, Atkinson (1987) and Mitchell (1988) (as cited in Miles, 2004) agreed that there are several classroom situations in which L1 is preferable. These circumstances include the talk about classroom discipline, stimulation of schemata, comprehension check.

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