

**Informed Use of the Mother Tongue
in the English Language Classroom**

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What role, if any, should the students' mother tongue play in the language classroom? Discuss, with reference to second language acquisition theory and research findings.

1. INTRODUCTION

The language classroom may at first appear to be an inappropriate place to observe the students' mother tongue (L1) in use, yet it is a phenomenon that exists in many of today's classrooms around the world. Allowing, or even promoting, the use of the students' L1 in the language classroom remains a contentious issue; an issue which deserves further consideration by open-minded teachers and researchers alike.

When we consider the role of the students' L1 in the classroom, we may inevitably think back to the grammar-translation method. The bygone "whipping boy" (Atkinson 1987: 242, Heltai 1989: 288) of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement has seen its heyday come and go yet still enjoys popularity around the world today. This popularity exists despite the fact that it is a "psychologically implausible" and "practically impossible" teaching method (Johns 1991: 3). Some similarities can be observed between the grammar-translation method and contemporary uses of the students' L1 in the language classroom, but other connections are tenuous and undeserved.

This paper hopes to explore the advantages and disadvantages of using the students' L1 in English language teaching (ELT) with specific regard to second language acquisition (SLA) theory, as well as the effectiveness of incorporating contemporary translation techniques into a communicative language classroom. After a discussion of some of the developments in ELT after the grammar-translation method, I will review the pertinent literature related to SLA before moving on to a consideration of the advantages and disadvantages associated with mother tongue use in the classroom, concluding with a look at some communicative translation techniques.

2. AFTER GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION

The grammar-translation method reigned in Europe until the mid-20th century. The main objective was for students to learn how to read and write in the foreign language. This was accomplished through memorization of grammar rules and bilingual word lists, explicit presentation of grammar rules, translation of contrived, de-contextualized sentences, and a strong focus on accuracy. The students' L1 was used as the form of instruction allowing for limited exposure to, and use of, the target language (TL) in the classroom.

As a result of the grammar-translation method, the students' communicative needs were not attended to and most found "the conceptual leap from the classroom to genuine communication outside the classroom" a difficult one (Nunan 1999: 73). As dissatisfaction towards the grammar-translation method grew and the demand for oral competence became more evident, the 19th century reformers in Europe believed that, among other things, "translation should be avoided, although the native language could be used in order to explain new words or to check comprehension" (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 10).

Gradually foreign language teaching (FLT) moved away from the dependence on the students' native language for instruction and moved towards the active use of the TL in the language classroom. The methods that followed (The Direct Method and Situational Language Teaching) effectively eliminated the students' L1 from the classroom, superseded by TL-only instruction.

3. SLA RESEARCH AND MOTHER TONGUE USE

SLA research has not provided an infallible solution for FLT, but it has shown us the light. Most would not only agree that the learner has to be exposed to the TL, but also use the language in a meaningful way through negotiated interaction with their teachers and classmates. It is also generally agreed that learners should not be handed everything on a silver platter; they need to "discover" how the new language works aided by inductive teaching techniques.

3.1 No easy answers

What is the best way to learn a second language? What is the best way to teach a second language? Over the last several decades there have been many theories generated, countless research studies conducted and numerous methods developed specifically in hopes of answering those very questions. Brown (2000: 14) maintains that:

There are no instant recipes. No quick and easy method is guaranteed to provide success. Every learner is unique. Every teacher is unique. Every learner-teacher relationship is unique, and every context is unique.

Finding a perfect teaching method for every ELT classroom seems impossible, so Brown (2000: 14) advises teachers to adopt “a cautious, enlightened, and eclectic approach”. Other ELT professionals also promote informed eclecticism in the classroom (Breen 2001: 315, Lightbrown & Spada 2006: 34), recommending a variety of activities and tasks to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. With this open-minded outlook on language learning and teaching it appears difficult to discount any technique, such as the calculated use of the students’ L1 in the language classroom, without careful consideration.

Total removal of the mother tongue from the language classroom is not the consensus among ELT practitioners. Many admit the mother tongue has a role to play (Nunan 1999: 73, Carter 1987: 153, Brown 2000: 138, Dornyei 1995: 58, Holliday 1994: 7), although in most cases, a very limited one. SLA research has to take into account the reality of the English language classroom on a global scale. Most English language teachers worldwide are non-native (Harbord 1992: 350) and the complete shunning of the students’ mother tongue in the classroom is often viewed skeptically. This is also true of many native teachers who see the students’ L1 as facilitative to the learning process (Rutherford 1987, Brown 2000: 95). Green (1970: 219) points to the failure of the Direct Method in India as evidence that “(m)ost teachers insist that some use of the native language, and usually the teaching of translation as well, are necessary features of any workable method.” At the very least, teachers need to show a high respect for their students’ mother tongue (Brown 2000: 195).

3.2 “Comprehensible input” and time constraints

Likely the most vocal opponent of mother tongue use in the classroom has been Stephen Krashen (1981) and his ‘comprehensible input’ hypothesis. Since Krashen’s theory is based on the importance of target language input for second language acquisition, any reduction of the target language would then be seen as a wasted opportunity for valuable input. Although Krashen’s theories, separating acquisition from learning and extolling “ $i + 1$ ” as the magical key to acquisition, have been proven faulty (Brown 2000: 281), it is impossible to dismiss the importance of concentrated target language use in the classroom.

The reason being is because the significance of target language input becomes even more apparent in an EFL setting where there is limited time available for students to study English, sometimes only one or two hours a week, as is often the case in many schools across Japan. Limited exposure outside the EFL classroom also adds to the importance of high quality/ high quantity TL output in the classroom.

Krashen is not alone in his call for 100% TL use. Duff & Polio (1990) quote Chaudron (1988), who promotes a “rich TL environment”, and Ellis (1984), who warns against “depriv(ing) learners of valuable input in the L2”, as two notable proponents of keeping the students’ L1 out of the classroom. Even though most teachers and researchers would agree that the majority of classroom interaction should be conducted in English (Harbord 1992), as Eldridge (1996) points out, there is “no empirical evidence to support the notion that restricting mother tongue use would necessarily improve learner efficiency. Atkinson (1987: 241) adds that “total prohibition of the students’ L1 is now unfashionable”.

3.3 “Comprehensible output” and negotiated interaction

In addition to receiving quality English input, students also have to use the language! Swain’s (1985) ‘comprehensible output’ hypothesis highlights the importance of actively using the language in the classroom apart from just receiving quality input. SLA research states, above all, that language is best learned when the language is used for real, meaningful communication (Canale 1983, Nunan 1987, Willis 1990). Negotiation of

meaning between learners, and between teachers and learners, is also seen as key to the SLA process (Allwright 1984, Brown 2001, Skehan 2001, Breen 2001, Lightbrown & Spada 2006).

Most of the input and output is negotiated through group and/ or pair work utilizing meaningful tasks. Learners need to “push” themselves to produce comprehensible output that their interlocutor can understand (Swain 1985, summarized in Lightbrown & Spada 2006: 44). Long (1983) (summarized in Lightbrown & Spada 2006: 43) also notes that “modified interaction” is needed for a language to be acquired. Instead of resorting to their L1, students should adjust their output to make it comprehensible to their interlocutor. If the student uses their L1 then nothing is negotiated and therefore little learning has taken place.

3.4 Inductive “discovery”

In addition to the use of meaningful and context-rich language, students are encouraged to “discover” language rules through inductive techniques (Johns 1991, Willis 1993) or as Breen (2001: 314) phrases it, through a “voyage of discovery”. When learners form their own understanding of the target language without being explicitly told by the teacher, then they have a much better chance to internalize, retain and use the language productively at a later date. Much of the discovery can take the form of problem-solving activities, which encourage students to make their own hypotheses about the language.

Some teachers may be weary of relying on their students to discover important language items, or some just might not have the time. Brown (2000: 90) contends that “discovery” can be a waste of precious time in the classroom. He even suggests that although “an inductive approach to rules and generalizations” is the superior approach in SLA, that it “may be appropriate ... to articulate a rule” at times (Brown 2000: 97). Johns (1991: 3) goes one step further is suggesting that inductive language teaching “may show no discernible advantage over the more traditional deductive approach”.

4 THE MOTHER TONGUE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Many English language teachers go to great lengths to avoid the use of their students' mother tongue in the classroom. Nunan (1999: 158) describes a situation where an EFL teacher in China imposed fines on his students when they spoke Cantonese in the classroom. The effect, unsurprisingly, was that the students just fell silent. The teacher got his wish of no Cantonese, but ironically he did not get any English from his students either!

Harbord (1992: 350) contends that the “strategy of mother tongue avoidance” in ELT can be explained by the emergence of two major trends:

- The growth of ELT as a casual career for young travelers visiting Europe, which necessitated the use of English only in the classroom.
- The development of a “British-based teacher training movement”, which aimed at providing guidance to English teachers working with multilingual classes.

Even with many teachers avoiding the students' L1, it can work its way into the English language classroom in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons. What follows is not an exhaustive list but is meant to highlight some of the major ways the students' L1 is represented in the language classroom. They have been divided into three broad categories: (1) providing L1 equivalents of English words and expressions; (2) using L1 to focus on language in use; (3) using L1 for classroom interaction.

4.1 Providing L1 equivalents of English words and expressions

Atkinson (1987: 243) recommends techniques using L1 equivalents for “eliciting language” and “checking for comprehension”. Eliciting language can be done by both teacher and student, often in the form of “How do you say _____ in English?” According to Atkinson (1987: 243), checking for comprehension using questions like “How do you say ‘I've been waiting for 10 minutes’ in Spanish?” is “often more foolproof and quicker than more ‘inductive’ checking techniques.” But is quicker necessarily better? What implications does this have for SLA?

Using L1 equivalents alongside L2 words is also seen as a useful approach to memorizing new vocabulary (Carter 1987: 153). Although most teachers prefer to teach vocabulary in context, Seibert (1930/ 1945) (quoted in Carter 1987: 168) found that providing paired lists with L1 equivalents was the superior approach. Of course many teachers would discount such a statement, claiming that vocabulary should not be learned out of context, especially with L1 pairings (Cook 1991, summarized in Willis 1997: 138).

The L1 may also be used as cues for English pattern practice (Green 1970: 218). Such practice is reminiscent of the Audio Lingual Method, but some believe that its limited use may still have a place within a broader communicative approach (Willis 1990: 73). Pattern practice alone is not enough to acquire a language and using the students' L1 would likely be seen as an even less favorable technique by most English teachers.

4.2 Using L1 to focus on language in use

Explaining grammar usage and meaning in the students' L1 goes far beyond the single word or short phrase translation into an extended explanation by the teacher. This is indicative of the grammar translation method and still a technique that many students, especially at the early levels, want and many teachers, especially non-native speakers, provide. This deductive approach to teaching grammar flies in the face of contemporary SLA research extolling inductive learning techniques.

Green (1970: 218) also described the translation of sentences as a way to exemplify specific grammar points and vocabulary. This technique, which is characteristic of the grammar translation method, is often criticized for ignoring context and meaning and encouraging word-for-word translations.

Titford (1983: 53) used a technique which he called "spoof translation" with his advanced students. He provided students with a glaringly erroneous translation in hopes that they would shift their focus away from the individual lexical items and look at the "clearly un-English" syntax. This type of activity can be seen as a consciousness raising experience, allowing students to discover what can and cannot work in English and warning students to be weary of word-for-word translations.

Going beyond the sentence-level translation, Atkinson (1987: 244) refers to the translation of longer passages as “presentation and reinforcement of language”. He claims that when students translate from their mother tongue into English, they can focus on accuracy and notice the key structural differences between the two texts. Atkinson (1987: 244) suggests that this kind of activity is best suited for early levels and asserts that, although it is not communicative on its own, it can be used to complement fluency activities.

Titford (1983), Baynham (1983), Edge (1986), Tudor (1987), Heltai (1989) and Eadie (1999), all propose the use of “back translation”. Back translation goes beyond grammatical analysis and typically involves pairs of students translating two different authentic English texts into their mother tongue, switching texts and translating ‘back’ to English, then comparing the originals. The comparisons and analyses lead to further discussion about what “works” in English. These specific studies will be reviewed in depth in the section entitled ‘translation as a communicative technique’.

4.3 Using L1 for classroom interaction

Atkinson (1987: 243) suggests that “at very low levels” communicative activities can be quite troublesome to set up, so using the students’ mother tongue to give instructions is warranted. However, utilizing the mother tongue in this way effectively removes a chance for real communication between the teacher and students, albeit using classroom specific communication. Harbord (1992: 353) also takes exception with Atkinson’s point, calling it “counter-productive”. Most teachers would agree that if the task is too complicated to explain then it’s not worth doing, or at least an alternative introduction to the task is needed. Harbord (1992: 353) recommends that teachers could possibly make an activity out of the instructions themselves!

Another use of the mother tongue involves learners communicating with one another *about* a task. This can take the form of comparing answers, explaining grammatical structures within the task (Atkinson 1987: 243) or as Eldridge (1996: 306) observed in his

classroom, using the mother tongue to comment, evaluate and discuss the task at hand. According to SLA research, this use of the L1 would eliminate the negotiation of meaning between classmates and would therefore offer very little to the learning process.

Eldridge (1996: 305) noted another interesting use of the mother tongue in regards to “floor-holding”. He hypothesizes that the “native code ... may function as a kind of stopgap, while the (target code) is being retrieved.” Of course this may be unavoidable at early levels, but students should be made aware of the available communication strategies involving English “stopgaps”, such as “Umm”, “Let me see”, or “Just a minute”.

Atkinson (1987: 244) suggests using the students’ L1 to “discuss classroom methodology”, especially at early levels. He reasons that students have a right to know what they are doing in the classroom and why they are doing it. This can be seen as particularly useful if the teacher wants to introduce some new communicative type activity involving pair or group work that is unfamiliar to the students (Willis 1997: 135). Many students have only ever been taught in a traditional teacher-fronted English language classroom, so there is a potential risk that they will not accept change easily without an explanation.

5 ADVANTAGES OF USING THE MOTHER TONGUE

As can be seen from the analysis above of the literature on mother tongue use in the classroom, some instances are helpful to the learning process and may be accepted by most, while other uses are detrimental and should be avoided. The three main advantages often cited (Atkinson 1987) for using the students’ L1 in the classroom are presented below.

5.1 Humanistic element

Atkinson (1987: 242) agrees with Bolitho (1983) that permitting students to use their L1 brings a “valuable ‘humanistic’ element” into the language classroom, allowing students to express themselves clearly and effectively. The assumption here is that once students have expressed what they want to say in their L1 then the teacher can help them articulate

it in English. This may seem acceptable at first but we need to ask ourselves, how much learning is lost when students resort to their mother tongue to express themselves? Atkinson (1987: 245) goes on to seemingly contradict himself when he adds that “students need to be encouraged to develop communication strategies” and “need to be made aware of how much they in fact can do with the limited corpus of language they possess.” So, should students struggle to communicate with their limited English or should they resign themselves to using their L1?

Harbord (1992: 351) sees this “humanistic view” as a reasonable attitude towards the use of the students’ mother tongue and considers it highly unlikely that a teacher would refuse to answer a question like “How can I say ‘Ça m’est égal?’”. Appealing to the teacher for help in such a limited fashion, involving single words or short phrases, may appear harmless but the obvious danger with this strategy is that learners may become overly dependant and revert to it automatically without attempting to express themselves in English. Teachers need to ensure that students only use this technique sparingly as it also proves insufficient outside the classroom.

5.2 Preferred learning strategy

Atkinson (1987: 242) claims the most significant advantage of mother tongue use is that it is consistent with the “preferred learning strategies” of the majority of learners in language classrooms around the world. In other words, if students want something translated and will likely do it on their own anyway, why not give it to them directly. This is especially evident with beginner and intermediate students. Students are often comforted to know exactly what a new grammatical structure or lexical item means in the first language. In his study of Spanish use in EFL classrooms in Puerto Rico, Schweers (1999: 8) found that 88.7% of students felt Spanish should be used in the classroom to explain difficult concepts, define new vocabulary items and to check for comprehension. It is difficult to ignore the wishes of the students when contemplating one’s approach to teaching, but as teachers we need to know where to draw the line.

Is it a preferred strategy for all learners? Some teachers, especially at private English language schools, may argue that students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, so when they come to English class it is “English Time”. Students may come for only one or two hours a week and, during that limited time, want an English-only atmosphere. In fact, some students may be offended if the teacher addresses them in anything other than English, possibly feeling as if the teacher doesn’t think they can understand the English.

5.3 Time saving device

Harvard psychologist Roger Brown (1973) (cited in Richards and Rodgers 2001: 13) expressed his annoyance in watching a teacher try to explain new vocabulary through elaborate “verbal gymnastics” when in his opinion, “translation would have been a much more efficient technique.” As the anecdote suggests, translation, or mother tongue use, is often encouraged as an efficient, time-saving technique; supported by many ELT professionals (Green 1970, Atkinson 1987, Tudor 1987).

Many instances of L1 use are associated with the need to save time, but as Harbord (1992: 355) points out, saving time is not an effective use of translation or the mother tongue in general. He quotes Duff (1989) in saying that:

The mother tongue should be used to provoke discussion and speculation, to develop clarity and flexibility of thinking, and to help us increase our own and our students’ awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language that occurs during any type of language acquisition.

Thinking along these lines, the following section details six selected research studies which have attempted to incorporate the mother tongue into a more communicative approach.

6 TRANSLATION AS A COMMUNICATIVE TECHNIQUE

The extended use of the mother tongue described in this section may not be suitable for every English language classroom. In order for this type of technique to be successful, the following conditions should ideally be met:

- EFL (not ESL) context
- Monolingual class
- Advanced level students
- The teacher is a fluent speaker of the students' L1

These are the ideal conditions, but as can be seen below in Table 1, they are not necessary for the successful use of translation as a technique in a communicative language classroom.

Table 1

Study	Titford (1983)	Baynham (1983)	Edge (1986)	Tudor (1987)	Heltai (1989)	Eadie (1999)
Description	EFL	ESL	EFL	EFL/ ESP	EFL	EFL
Teacher Needs L1?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Student Level	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	Advanced	All Levels

6.1 Description of translation techniques

Titford (1983) claims that translation has largely been overlooked in CLT and therefore suggests two techniques available for advanced learners of English. He advocates the use of “spoof translation” and “back-translation”, as described in section 5.2 above. Titford sees translation as a “problem solving exercise” which raises students’ awareness by comparing and contrasting the mother tongue with the target language. Through this problem solving, students can increase “their feeling for communicative appropriateness in the L2” (Titford 1983: 56). Titford contends that his techniques are not alternatives to more communicative tasks, but have the potential to consolidate language and open the way to more communicative follow-up activities.

Baynham (1983) similarly supports the use of back-translation, but differs from the other studies discussed here in that his takes place within an ESL context in Britain with a private student. Baynham's (1983: 317) impetus for implementing translation as a technique was to "overcome a block in motivation" with an advanced student. The main objective was to improve the student's writing by analyzing both written and spoken discourse in the student's mother tongue. The student was encouraged to look for the "English way" of saying something rather than merely translating word-for-word (Baynham 1983: 313). By incorporating meaningful material from the student's home country into the English lesson and giving more responsibility for learning to the student, Baynham achieved a positive result in the form of increased motivation and increased self-awareness of his student's personal writing style.

Edge (1986) also details a back-translation activity which is meant to increase involvement, motivation and responsibility in the students. Edge (1986: 121) sees foreign language teaching and translation as being connected, adding that "(t)here is no obvious reason why an ability to translate should not be seen as a type of communicative competence." Edge's technique allows for pair and group work, contrastive discussions involving accuracy and appropriateness, and uses translation as a topic for further discussions in English. Like Titford (1983), Edge (1986: 124) also feels that the "procedure creates a communicative context for more formal follow-up work."

Tudor (1987) outlines two translation activities for a group of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners in Germany. Both activities rely on the students' L1 for input, but both require English output. The first activity is an oral presentation and the second is a text-based class discussion. Tudor (1987: 271) feels that the "L1 input ... served to 'stretch' learners' L2 productive abilities." He admits that these types of activities are not possible in all English language teaching situations but considers translation to be a communicative activity that could be used on a broader scale within EFL/ ESP.

Heltai (1989: 288) admits that translation was both over-used and inefficiently used in the past. It made use of boring material, focused on writing exercises and was not integrated

with other kinds of tasks. But he contends that when used properly, translation can provide motivation to advanced EFL students and can help to highlight important differences between the two languages. Heltai (1989: 289) also makes an excellent point that advanced students are often asked to translate outside the English classroom for those who do not speak the language. 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.

Heltai (1989: 290), like Titford (1983), Baynham (1983) and Tudor (1987), says that “translation has to be dispensed with in situations where the teacher does not speak the language of his or her students.” This caveat seems logical but as Edge (1986) and Eadie (1999) argue, the teacher’s knowledge of the students’ L1 is not a prerequisite for bringing translation into the English language classroom.

Eadie’s (1999) technique can be seen as an adaption of Edge’s (1986) earlier work. Eadie (1999) proposes a lesson plan for a monolingual EFL class using back-translation with a teacher whom does not speak the students’ L1. Eadie (1999) admits that translation may not be suitable for all classrooms; its success will depend upon the cooperation of the class and will require a strict time limit for translations.

Eadie’s (1999) goal is “to show that translation can be communicative, intellectually challenging, and fun for the whole class.” She also contends that using the mother tongue to save time is a weak argument for its use and that raising the students’ consciousness and introducing the concept of “tolerance of more than one correct alternative” is the ideal purpose. She accomplishes this by using the chart seen below in Table 2. Her students spent a considerable amount of time in groups comparing and contrasting their translations with the originals and contemplating if their translations were acceptable or not. These discussions were all conducted in English.

Table 2

Original Version	Acceptable	Not too bad	Unacceptable
... he was dressed as he wore he wear the clothes of he weared him a dress ...

6.2 Replication of Eadie’s Translation Technique

Before I attempted Eadie’s (1999) lesson plan with two of my English conversation classes (one intermediate and one advanced) I felt, as Eadie (1999) had predicted some teachers would feel, “reluctant to use L1 for fear of escalating the use of L1 and ... reducing exposure to English.” My students were also a little apprehensive as we do not usually use any Japanese in the classroom except for the odd “How do you say ____ in English?”. Some of my students actually ask me, “Is it OK if I use Japanese for a minute?”. They must have been fined by their previous teachers!

I used Eadie’s (1999) example text recommended for lower intermediate students (see Appendix 1) for both of my classes as I was unsure of the background my students had in translation and did not want to make the maiden translation lesson an overly difficult experience. During the one hour lessons, students spent about a third of the time translating and the other two thirds discussing, in English, what was acceptable and why. Some interesting discussions can be seen in the tables below.

Table 3

Using context to derive meaning

S1: What about a missing word?

T: Look at the context, the words before and after.

S1: The original was “On his bald head” ...

S2: I didn’t translate exactly.

T: That’s OK.

S2: Because before the word, his hair was cut off and the letter was written ...so he is obviously bald”

S1: Yes, obviously. So it’s acceptable.

(A short discussion regarding the use of context to derive meaning followed.)

Table 4

Active vs. Passive Voice

S1: How about the structure ... sentence structure?

T: OK, good.

S1: Passive and ... what is the opposite of passive?

T: Active.

S1: Active, yes.

T: So you switched? Can you give me the example?

S1: "His hair was cut off again and the letter was read to the king". That's the original one... and I wrote "the king was able to read the message after shaving his hair."

T: What do you think?

S1: I think the meaning is the same. And "cut off" and "shave" is the same.

S3: Acceptable.

T: Yes, I'd say it is perfectly acceptable.

(A short discussion on the uses of the active and passive voices followed.)

Table 5

Lexical Choice

S2: I have "method". The original one is "method" and I wrote "way".

T: Ok, "method" and "way". What do you think?

S2: ... to send a message.

T: Method to send a message?

S1: Same.

S3: ... interesting method. Same.

S1: Same!

S2: Really?

S1: Almost the same.

T: ... interesting method ...

S3: Like a formal, or technical ... “method”.

T: It sounds more formal ...

S1: Almost the same.

S3: Yeah, “way” is a little, how to say, conversational.

S1: Acceptable.

T: Yeah, I think so.

(A short discussion followed about the acceptability of alternative lexical choices in English.)

I was pleasantly surprised at the result of the lessons. Students seemed to really enjoy themselves and the task stimulated some lively discussions. Students not only discovered *how* to state meanings differently but also *why* some things were stated differently. We touched on some learning strategies, grammar points, and lexical choices available to students. Above all, the lessons focused on the importance of meaning over perfection and demonstrated to students that they can use a variety of means to express themselves.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Using the students’ L1 in the classroom to save time or to make life easier for the students and/ or teachers is not an effective or beneficial technique for SLA. This does not however mean that the mother tongue has no place in the language classroom. The students bring with them a thorough understanding of their L1 which they will inevitably draw upon in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Using the students’ L1 to raise students’ awareness about the similarities and differences between the two languages and helping them to discover different ways to express themselves in the TL can be a powerful technique in the learning process; a technique that should not be discarded so quickly.

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Appendix 1: Example taken from a lower intermediate class (Eadie 1999)

A

There are many ways of sending secret messages. An interesting method was used by a Chinese general, called Pingyo, 2000 years ago. Pingyo's army was far from their homeland. Between the soldiers and home there were many enemies. But Pingyo sent letters to his king and the enemy could not read them. He sent them like this:

B

A strong messenger was chosen from the soldiers. His hair was cut off and a letter was written on his bald head. Then he was dressed as a poor farmer and sent home. His journey lasted many weeks. During this time his hair grew and covered the message. The enemy stopped him many times. He was searched but the letter was not found. When he reached the king's palace his hair was cut off again and the letter was read to the king.