

The Role of L1 in the L2 Classroom

by

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1. Introduction

'L2-only' is a policy that is widespread in various language teaching contexts throughout the world and the prevailing wisdom is that learning English in English is the best way to learn. Recently there have been some dissenting voices within the field of TESL/TEFL which challenge the well-established practice of excluding the mother tongue from the language classroom. Can learners acquire a second language in an environment that allows and exploits their first language? Or is the allowance of the mother tongue at the expense of acquisition?

The aim of this paper is to establish that the mother tongue does have a significant role to play in the language classroom. In order to establish this, it is necessary to first look at the background of the 'L2-only' policy from its roots in the establishment of the Direct Method as a reaction against Grammar Translation to the reasoning behind it in current methodology, second language acquisition theory, and teaching practice. The second half of the paper will then introduce some of the recent calls by teachers and researchers to allow the use of the mother tongue in the classroom and some specific examples of where the use of the mother tongue might be warranted.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Fall of the Grammar Translation Method

The dominant language teaching methodology ‘from the 1840s to the 1940s’ (Richards and Rogers, 2001: 6), Grammar Translation’s primary focus was on ‘grammatical rules as the basis for translating from the second language to the native language’ (Brown, 2000: 15) and lessons were conducted almost entirely in the students’ mother tongue. According to Richards and Rogers (ibid.: 6), little to no attention to spoken language, memorization of ‘endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary’, and the demand for perfectly accurate translations of ‘stilted or literary prose’ led many who studied by this method to remember it with ‘distaste’. The bad taste left by Grammar Translation led to the eventual rejection of the method and nearly everything associated with it. It is interesting to note however, that GT, despite having ‘no advocates’ (ibid.: 7), is still used in countries where oral communication is not the primary goal but rather achievement on standardized tests dominates the foreign language classroom.

2.2 The Reform Movement

The rejection of Grammar Translation and the rise of various approaches and methodologies which gained prominence throughout the 20th century have done much to colour the view of the mother tongue in ELT. The Reform Movement of the 1880s, born out of a growing need for communication among Europeans, put new emphasis on the spoken language and advocated ‘establishing associations within the target language rather than...with the native language’ (Richards and Rogers, 2001: 9). While not rejecting the use of the mother tongue outright –

reformers did allow for L1 in explaining new vocabulary and checking comprehension (ibid.: 10) – the Reform Movement certainly reduced its importance. An interest in the use of naturalistic principles, ‘such as are seen in first language acquisition’ (ibid.: 11), became the basis for the development of the Direct Method.

2.3 The Direct Method

Built on a foundation of naturalistic principles such as inductive grammar, oral interaction, and a focus on the teacher rather than the text (ibid.: 11-14), the Direct Method gained widespread support at the turn of the century. Chief among its principles and procedures was the exclusive use of the target language in the classroom in the hopes of mirroring first language acquisition. Although the Direct Method was ‘quite successful in private language schools, such as those of the Berlitz chain,’ it was criticized for the way it ‘overemphasized and distorted’ (ibid.: 12) similarities between naturalistic L1 acquisition and classroom L2 learning, its dependence on skilled native or near-native speaking teachers, and its reliance on exclusive target language use at the expense of efficiency. Despite these criticisms and the subsequent decline of the Direct Method’s popularity it paved the way for the ‘methods era’ of the late 20th century and its legacy still has considerable influence on the way the mother tongue is viewed in English language teaching today.

3. Reasons Behind the Avoidance of L1 in ELT Today

3.1 Attention to L1 in the Current Methodology

Vivian Cook says that we have inherited ‘certain basic assumptions’ about language teaching:

Among them are the ideas that spoken language is more basic than written, explicit discussion of grammar should be avoided, and language should be practiced as a whole, rather than as separate parts. Part and parcel of this tradition is the discouragement of L1 use in the classroom. (2001)

Though recent methods, unlike the Direct Method, don’t explicitly forbid the use of the students’ mother tongue in the classroom, they imply that it is not welcome by:

1. making no reference to it at all (Hubbard et al., 1983 in Atkinson, 1987: 24)
2. listing it as a problem (Harmer, 1998: 129-130)
3. cautioning against its overuse (Gower and Walters’, 1983 in Atkinson, 1987: 24)
4. offering advice for increasing L2 use (Duff and Polio, 1990: 162-163)

This omission or negative connotation of L1 use in teacher training manuals and discussions of methodology has led many teachers to feelings of guilt (Harbord, 1992; Auerbach, 1993; Prodromou, 2002; Butzkamm, 2003) when the L1 makes an appearance in their classrooms. And as much as teachers, through training and/or personal convictions, may like to eliminate the mother tongue from their teaching practices it will ‘(creep) back in, however many times you throw it out with a pitchfork’ (Cook, 2001).

3.2 Second language acquisition theory justifications

3.2.1 L2 acquisition should mirror L1 acquisition

One of the justifications often given for the exclusive use of L2 in the language classroom is that second language acquisition should emulate first language acquisition. After all, aren't the vast majority of children around the world highly successful users of their mother tongue? The argument breaks down for several strong reasons.

Firstly, L2 learners are not, in Swan's words, 'tabula rasa' (1985, 1: 10). The L2 learner, especially in the case of adults, comes to the classroom with a full working knowledge of their mother tongue and all its intricacies. To ignore this is to ignore a vast store of knowledge that can be used to facilitate the learning of L2 and to treat the learner as if they know nothing is, in a word, insulting.

Secondly, as Professor Guy Cook (2002) points out,

Second language learners usually end up less proficient, but they learn much faster. At a conservative estimate of 10 hours a day, a five-year-old had had 18,250 hours of meaning-focused interaction but could still only speak like a five-year-old. (in Deller and Rinvolveri, 2002: 93)

It is safe to say that no second language learners have that kind of time to dedicate, nor would they be satisfied with those results. Fortunately, learners have their mother tongue and all the knowledge that comes with it to help speed up the process.

Thirdly, as Cook (2001) argues, the measurement of success for an L2 learner

should not be native speaker competence. Few, if any, learners achieve this level of ability and it is not at all productive for them or their teachers to view this as a failure. Second language learners should not be viewed as ‘shadows of native speakers’ but as ‘L2 users in their own right’.

3.2.2 The L2 needs to be kept separate from the L1

The need to keep the L2 separate from the L1 in order to achieve successful second language acquisition is another argument espousing the virtue of avoiding the use of the mother tongue (described in Cook, 2001). This theory is closely tied to the theory of Contrastive Analysis (see Shortall 1996: 32-34; Brown 2000: 207-213; Richards and Rogers 2001: 52) which seeks to predict potential errors and interference resulting from transfer from the mother tongue to the L2. By compartmentalizing the two languages into separate places in the mind of the learner, interference is avoided. Here too, the argument breaks down.

Firstly, it is doubtful whether it is even possible for the mind to separate L1 and L2 into different compartments due to the complexities of the human brain. The teacher can impose the L2 on the classroom, but arguably the students will always make connections in their minds where they cannot be seen nor quantified.

Secondly, it seems ill-advised to try to separate the L1 and L2. Similar to the L1 acquisition argument discussed above, compartmentalization seems to suggest that the L2 compartment would begin empty, creating the need to learn everything about the world again in the L2. Butzkamm (1998: 83) believes that keeping the two languages separate is ‘psychologically unsound’ for learners who have already

acquired a mother tongue. Better to use the L1 as ‘scaffolding’ (Weschler 1997; Butzkamm 2003) on which to build the L2.

Thirdly, by actively seeking out the errors caused by interference from the mother tongue both students and teachers can deal with them appropriately. An ‘L2-only’ approach doesn’t allow for this kind of careful examination.

3.2.3 Acquisition takes place only in the target language

The influence of Krashen’s theories of acquisition (detailed in Brown, 2000: 277-281; Richards and Rogers 2001: 178-183) have had considerable influence on L2 teaching practice. Because it is thought that acquisition can only take place through ‘comprehensible input’ in the target language, conscious learning, and consequently L1 used for that purpose, has been relegated to a very minor status. While it may be true that acquisition can only occur in the L2, learning is also necessary to aid the process. Butzkamm (2003) suggests that the use of the mother tongue through materials like bilingual texts can allow students to access ‘richer, more authentic texts’ sooner and thus give them ‘more comprehensible input and faster acquisition’. Weschler (1997) argues that ‘L2-only’ instruction is unlikely to constitute comprehensible input for many students without some attention to the explanation of meaning in the students’ mother tongue.

3.3 Teaching Context, Training, and Teachers

3.3.1 ESL Environment

In the context of English as a Second Language, in the case of immigrants who need to assimilate into English-speaking society or students from abroad who have come for intensive study of English, perhaps an English-only approach is warranted. After all, in these types of environments, students come from many different

language backgrounds and, in order to communicate with each other in their classes, English is the only common ground. And teachers in these institutions certainly cannot be expected to have a working knowledge of each student's mother tongue. English Language Schools in North America, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand often enforce a 'strict English-only policy' and a quick search of language school sites on the World Wide Web reveals a variety of penalties for breaking such policies, running the gamut from small monetary fines to suspension from classes to permanent expulsion from the school for repeat offenders. The policy is well-established and seems to be rooted in necessity.

There are, however, dissenting voices in regard to the exclusion of the students' mother tongue from ESL study. Auerbach (1993) argues for the inclusion of the students' L1 in ESL because 'it reduces affective barriers to English acquisition and allows for more rapid progress to or in ESL'. Acceptance of the L1 provides a 'sense of security' for learners which will later allow them to take risks and experiment with the language they are learning. Immigrant students often develop resentment toward a system which forces them to learn English and doesn't acknowledge their mother tongue or their culture. Baynham describes through a case study how a somewhat disaffected ESL learner gained motivation and language skill by bringing his culture to the classroom through the medium of translated writing, tentatively suggesting that 'a mother tongue model can facilitate discourse organization' (1983: 315). In their book *Using the Mother Tongue*, Deller and Rinvoluceri detail several activities for multilingual classes which 'work on the assumption that (teachers) are happy to allow the students **full autonomy** in the

work using their MT' (2002: 10). These examples indicate that perhaps there are good reasons to call L2-only in ESL into question.

3.3.2 The EFL Classroom

Klevberg (2000) points out that one of the main reasons given for English-only policies in monolingual EFL environments is that the students have limited exposure to the target language, usually only within the confines of the classroom, and so use of the mother tongue constitutes a waste of valuable time. Though the argument of limited time seems on the surface to be a good reason for keeping the L1 out of the EFL classroom, it is precisely because of that lack of time that the mother tongue should be welcomed as a valuable and necessary resource. The shared knowledge of the mother tongue by all the students opens up many possibilities for language learning and despite many of these schools having a stated policy of 'L2-only' the mother tongue does make its way into the classroom.

3.3.3 ELT Training

The development of ELT methodology and training is often cited as a source 'L2-only' policies (Atkinson 1987 and 1995; Harbord 1992; Weschler 1997; Burden 2000; Critchley 2002; Owen 2003) because it

focuses mainly or exclusively on the relatively unrepresentative situation of a native speaker teaching a multilingual class in Britain or the USA. (Atkinson, 1987: 242)

While it may be understandable to use the L2 exclusively in a multilingual context, as mentioned above, it is surprising that these methods have been transferred to countries where classes are exclusively monolingual (G. Cook, 2002 in Deller and Rinvoluceri, 2002: 93).

3.3.4 Status of Native Speaking Teachers

Coupled with the development of ELT methodology in English-speaking countries has been the ‘disproportionate degree of status’ (Atkinson, 1987: 242) afforded to native speaking teachers outside of their own countries. The idea that the native speaker is the best teacher of English, a concept which serves the political and economic agendas of English-speaking countries (Phillipson, 1992; Auerbach, 1993), is still widely accepted in many countries. Though there are a number of sound arguments for native speaking teachers abroad developing working knowledge of the students’ mother tongue (Medgyes, 1992; Yamamoto-Wilson, 1997; Barker, 2003) and students often express a desire for teachers who speak their language (Prodromou, 2002; Burden, 2000; Critchley, 1999; Schweers, 1999), monolingual native speakers continue to ‘[spill] out into the world and [make] a living teaching English’ (Butzkamm, 2003). This has led both to the discarding of possibly viable L1 strategies, by native speaking teachers who lack the L1 knowledge to use them, in favour of an ‘L2-only’ approach and to feelings of inadequacy on the part of non-native speaking teachers ‘who make up the vast majority of language teachers’ (Harbord, 1992: 350) when they can’t follow such an approach.

4. Reasons for Using the Mother Tongue in the Classroom

Atkinson (1987: 242-243) points to the following three reasons in discussing some general advantages of allowing the mother tongue into the classroom.

4.1 Learner preference

Though it is 'commonplace to say that little is known about what constitutes effective language learning' (Atkinson, 1987: 242), too often teachers impose their own values and methods on their students without taking into consideration how their students might feel about them. McDonough (2002) notes that many of the techniques which teachers use with their students are not techniques which they themselves prefer when they become learners. Considering the preferences of learners is especially pertinent in the case of native speaking English teachers transplanted into a culture that is unfamiliar to them. Western methodology has firmly rejected Grammar Translation, yet it remains an entrenched part of language education in countries like Japan for example. A teacher who ignores this fact and forces a direct, communicative approach on students may meet with resistance. Better perhaps, to accept that students have an established way of doing things and try to work with it rather than against it. This is not to say that Western-trained teachers need throw out all they have learned but that they need to be aware that it may take some getting used to on the part of their students and may require some negotiation.

Burden (2000) conducted a survey of students in monolingual English conversation classes at several Japanese universities which found that a high number, some 73%, favoured the occasional use of the mother tongue by their teachers in the classroom,

though it should be noted that the percentage was significantly smaller among more advanced learners. The same number, 73%, favoured their own occasional use of the mother tongue, without significant differences across levels. Studies by Critchley (1999) in Japan, Schweers (1999) in Puerto Rico, and Prodromou (2002) in Greece all yielded similarly high numbers of students who prefer some use of their mother tongue in the classroom. There were significant differences among levels in all studies as to what exactly the mother tongue should be used for but the general consensus was that it should be used for pedagogical reasons, such as making lesson objectives clear, helping students to understand new vocabulary, explanations of grammar, and the like. The important point here is that students don't seem to believe in the total elimination of L1 from their classrooms.

4.2 Efficient Use of Time

Many who advocate the use of the mother tongue in the classroom cite efficiency as a reason behind the decision (Atkinson 1987; Klevberg 2000; Cook 2001; Hawks 2001; Nation 2003; Gill 2005). What takes a long time to explain in L2 may be explained quickly in the L1 and leave more class time for productive, communicative activity. While dedicating more time to communicative activity in the classroom is an admirable goal, teachers must be careful not to think of the mother tongue as a convenient shortcut or an 'easy option' (Hawks 2001). The benefits of students struggling to understand explanations in the L2 may outweigh the benefit of time-saving.

4.3 Humanistic approach

Accepting the students' use of the mother tongue in the classroom 'is a humanistic approach in that it permits them to say what they want' (Harbord 1992: 351). One

of the initial frustrations of many learners is that they have great difficulty expressing what they really mean because they lack the language skills. Teachers can allow the students' to say what they need to and then help or encourage them to say it in English (Atkinson 1987: 242; Klevberg 2000). The danger with this approach is that students may develop an 'excessive dependency on the mother tongue' (Atkinson, 1987: 246) and so care must be taken to guide the learners to a more active use of the L2.

5. Some Suggested Uses of the Mother Tongue in the EFL Classroom

5.1 Conveying and checking meaning of words or sentences

5.1.1 Concrete items

In the case of words or sentences whose meaning is concrete and can be expressed easily through established L2 strategies like visual aids, mime, or definition, L2 is certainly preferable for the language exposure it provides. A well-prepared teacher should be able to convey concrete meanings without resorting to the L1, but there are instances when it can be necessary, such as unexpected questions from students or when a well-prepared L2 strategy just doesn't get across to a particular group of learners. Atkinson (1987: 243) suggests that using questions such as 'How do you say X in English?' can save time in class that is wasted with less efficient methods like visual aids and mime and Harbord concedes that using such techniques for comprehension checks are 'cited as effective by many teachers' and don't seem to create a translation dependency on the part of the students (1992: 354). It is up to the teacher to decide whether efficiency or target language exposure is more important on a case-by-case basis.

5.1.2 Abstract items

Abstract items may be possible to convey without the use of L1, with the right amount of ingenuity on the part of the teacher, but often the meaning is not entirely clear to the students. In these cases, the danger of misunderstanding and the lack of efficiency outweighs the need for exposure to the target language and L1 should be used. Critchley (2002) gives a good example of a teacher taking ten minutes to explain four expressions to a student, after which the student could still not use the expressions properly. L1 use is likely to have cut the time and increased the

understanding in a situation like this. In the interest of checking the meanings of more abstract concepts, having the students express them in their L1 can be useful because as Weschler (1997) argues ‘unless you can rephrase a statement in your own first language such that the essence of the meaning is maintained, you really don't understand it’.

5.1.3 Dangers of translation

It must be noted, however, that there are inherent dangers with this kind of L1 use if it is done too much. One such danger is that students may come to rely heavily on the mother tongue and ‘feel that they have not ‘really’ understood any item of language until it has been translated’ (Atkinson, 1987: 246). Another danger, as Harbord (1992: 353) points out, is that too much use of translation in explaining meaning and checking comprehension ‘seem[s] highly likely to give students the impression that word-for-word translation is a useful technique’. Gabrielatos (1998) gives a great many examples of the problems of word-for-word translation and Harbord (ibid: 355) cites the work of Duff (1989) in recommending that translation be done in context, used not as time-saving device but to warn students of the dangers of translation.

5.2 Classroom Management

5.2.1 Giving instructions

There are many worthwhile classroom activities that may require complex instructions and, in most cases, L2 instruction coupled with a good demonstration is enough to get the message across and give students an example of L2 communication at work. Harbord (1992: 353) suggests turning the instructions themselves into a learning activity as a viable strategy for maximizing L2 use.

While Atkinson (1987: 243) concedes that giving instructions in the target language is an opportunity for genuine communication in the classroom, he recommends L1 use where useful activities have instructions that are more complex than the activity itself. This comes up often in language classes where even simple activities, if they are new to the students, can seem complicated to them. The only recourse in such cases, after exhausting all possible L2 strategies, is to resort to the L1 or allow a student who understands to explain it in the L1. It is worth noting that, in some cases, when the students don't 'get it' exactly, they may come up with an alternative way of doing the activity that the teacher may not have considered.

5.2.1 Discussing classroom methodology

This is an aspect of language teaching where many support the use of the mother tongue (Atkinson 1987; Harbord 1992; Gill 2005) because students may often be unfamiliar with the techniques teachers are trying to use with them. While this is a sound recommendation, what are native speaking teachers to do when they can't explain well enough in the students' mother tongue? A good many native speakers from the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand are employed as English teachers and many want to introduce new methods to students. Expecting such teachers to become sufficiently fluent in the students' mother tongue before introducing new methods or classroom practices doesn't seem reasonable. The only solution here may be to make use non-native teachers and administrators in co-operation with native teachers to explain and discuss methods with students, or to rely on written translations. Another possibility may be to have students use written comments, in their mother tongue of course, to express their feelings about the teacher's methods.

5.2.3 Managing children's classes

While the bulk of classroom management ought to be carried out in the target language to give students the sense that the language is used for a real purpose, there may be some circumstances when teaching children in which the use of the mother tongue is warranted. Disciplining students for bad behaviour may not seem real to some students and others may feign ignorance of the target language when they know very well that they are being scolded. In these cases, brief use of the mother tongue could let the students know that the teacher is serious. A small child who needs desperately to use the toilet shouldn't feel that they need to make their request perfectly in the target language, though this could also be covered in a lesson on classroom language. Crying children also can't be expected to explain the problem in English. Native speaking teachers of young learners would be well-advised to learn some of the students' mother tongue to deal with such common circumstances.

5.3 Co-operation among learners

Atkinson (1987: 243) offers co-operation by students, in pairs or groups, doing certain activities in the mother tongue as a suitable use, if the aim of the activity is not communicative. With grammar exercises, allowing students to communicate with each other in the mother tongue may alleviate the 'added burden' of coping with complicated metalanguage. He also says that sometimes even the clearest explanation by a teacher may not be understood by some students, so a quick explanation from a classmate in the L1 may help. Harbord agrees strongly with allowing students to use their L1 when comparing work seeing it as 'an extremely valuable activity that fosters both student co-operation and independence of thought' that, especially at lower levels, will reap greater benefits when done 'thoroughly in

the L1' than 'tokenistically in L2 or not at all' (1992: 354). For a teacher to prevent students from providing necessary support by insisting on 'L2-only' can only result in some students feeling isolated.

6. Conclusion

The role of the mother tongue in the language classroom should be to facilitate the learning process through judicious, limited use. The mother tongue has a lot to offer by way of the knowledge students bring with them to the classroom. Teachers should not see it as something to feel guilty about simply because of the way they have been trained. Each teaching situation is different and it is up to the teacher and the students to decide when using the mother tongue might be beneficial to the learning process. To reject its use on principle is to ignore the preferences of the learners and keep from them a very necessary and useful support for their learning. And make no mistake, even if the mother tongue is not present in the working of the classroom, it will always be present in the minds of the learners.

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