English Language and Applied Linguistics

Postgraduate Distance Learning programmes

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Student ID number	1306114
Module Number (1-6)	2
Title of Degree Programme:	M.A (Taught) Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language
Title of Module:	Module 2: Second Language Acquisition & Pedagogic Grammar
Assessment Task No.	PG/13/03
First or second submission (second submission is used for resubmitted work only)	First
Date Submitted	29/11/2013
Name of tutor	Brad Serl
Word Count	*3877*

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I declare:

a) that this submission is my own work;

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Student ID #1306114

Module 2: Second Language Acquisition & Pedagogic Grammar

PG/13/03

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.

3877 Words

Submitted 29/11/2013

Contents

1.0 Introduction

Historically, a students' mother tongue had no role to play in the L2 classroom. It's usage has been argued for and against for more than half a century ago and continues to this day. The debate is still going strong and numerous schools and institutions around the world cling to the belief that the L1 has a negative impact on learning (Brown, 2000: 195). In more recent years, the mother tongue has been found to address a host of classroom issues, and has become a practical way for teachers to promote the L2.

In this paper, I will briefly examine second language acquisition theory, why it has caused conflict, and how it has shaped the current landscape of L1 usage in the L2 classroom. I will then explain the various uses for the L1 and the criticisms against it. Although I plan to defend the informed usage of L1 when possible, I am currently unable to use strategies such as code-switching effectively as a teacher. However, I still believe the L1 has a place within the L2 classroom for teachers and students alike. The use of the L1 can help with numerous classroom issues and barriers to learning. Based on the evidence I will now present, this paper will show how the L1 has a role in the L2 classroom.

2.0 Literature review

To truly understand the role the MT plays in the L2 classroom, a review of the academic research on the subject is necessary. Numerous studies, surveys and analysis have made for a large amount of scholarship debating the usefulness of the L1 in the L2 classroom.

2.1 Second Language Acquisition Theory

Second language acquisition theory began in the 1960's due to the failures of the 'method' (Oral and Grammar-Translation) constructs that dominated the United States and Britain in the first half of the 20th century. This led to researchers studying the implementation of methods within the classroom, and

the criteria which was needed for a method to be successful. SLA would then focus on natural L2 acquisition, error analysis, and order of acquisition studies until the early 1980's (Ellis, 1992). Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model (1981, 1982, 1985) would then dominate second language-acquisition theory (Escamilla, K & Grassi, E. 2000; Saville-Troike, M. 2006: 45), along with a host of others: Behavioral Approach, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Nativist Approach, Cognitive Approach and the Social Interactionist Approach. (Trawiński, M. 2005: 8-18).

The issue of L1 use in the L2 classroom has been contentious and extensively debated (Ferrer, 2005: 1). Howatt (1984) explains that "the monolingual principle, the unique contribution of the twentieth century to classroom language teaching, remains the bedrock notion from which the others ultimately derive" (289). Furthermore, "Many language teachers today were trained in a philosophy that espouses a learning environment in which the target language (L2) is to be used at all times" (Vanderheijden, V., 2010: 1). This 'training' includes the Direct Method and Audio-lingual Method, which have both been found ineffective, but have still managed to discourage L1 use in the classroom for over a century (Timor, T. 2012: 2).

2.2 Changing opinions

While SLA theory increasingly took this internal focus (i.e. how teachers could use the learner's natural abilities to understand language), it ignored the feasibility of using the student's first language as a way to learn a second. In doing so, it neglected a powerful resource for students to learn. "When their L2 abilities fail, students should have as many tools as possible at their disposal—in the learning environment—to develop new learning" (Vanderheijden, V., 2010: 7). The use of L1 in the classroom is that tool. Modern SLA theory has moved beyond seeing the L1 as detrimental to the student. Levine (2003) claims "scholars have staked a claim for a sanctioned role for the learner's L1 in the language classroom" (344). To further explain this role, research on the subject will be examined in the next

section.

2.3 Research findings

Research and studies agree with this tactful usage of the L1. Schweers (1999) found in his survey of Puerto Rican university students that 88.7% felt that Spanish should be used in his English class. 86% of the respondents wanted their L1 to be used to explain difficult concepts (6-7). Krashen and Lao (1999) had similar results in Hong Kong, where "students in Chinese-medium programs appear to be more active, appear to learn more subject matter, enjoy school more, and are improving in English" (2). Levine (2003) and Macaro (1997) found teachers using the L1 to explain concepts, clarify instructions, translation, grammar and classroom management as well.

Other recent studies which concur with the pedagogical use of the L1 in the L2 classroom include Gulzar (2010) who found a limited mix of languages helpful and natural in Pakistan; Hassanzadeh & Nabifar (2011) found in Iran that a deeper awareness of the mother tongue led to better language learning in the TL, specifically in grammar; and Jingxia (2010) who shows that code-switching (i.e. when students or teachers switch between languages to better express an idea) is prevalent and plays a significant role in Chinese university education. He concludes that "it is not only impractical to exclude the L1 from the classroom but it is also likely to deprive students of an important tool for language learning" (12).

Atkinson's (1987:246) concerns on the over usage of the L1 are found in research as well and cannot be overlooked. In a study of Chinese students, Peng & Zhang (2009) claim:

> For most of the teachers, the amount of TL use was not more than 60% of their talk. This may not be sufficient enough for students' foreign language learning. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of pragmatics, teachers' TL use was not varied enough and was often found inappropriate. The findings of the study indicate that the current use of TL in FL classes of elementary schools in observed class is far from satisfactory (212).

While Levine (2003) is undeniably correct when he states that “TL and L1 appear to serve important functions” (356), studies such as Peng & Zhang's show that an unfocused use of the L1 can lead to issues that negatively impact the learning environment. Further concerns about the use of the L1 exist and will be explained in subsequent sections, but first we will explore the author's current context and the positive uses of the L1 and how it is applicable to my classroom.

3.0 Mother tongue in context

A student's L1 has various uses in the classroom that have been found to be effective ways to promote learning of the second language. First, I will present my current teaching situation and how the L1 could help to facilitate learning within it. I will then provide evidence for the use of the L1 and how teachers, such as myself, can utilize it in their classroom in order to promote the learning of the L2.

3.1 My context

I currently teach at a private language academy in a suburb of Seoul, South Korea. At present, my students range from late elementary school to early high school age, with the majority of them being middle school students. None of them would be considered beginners, and they are all able to communicate effectively both orally and in writing. Students generally have a positive attitude towards English and attending a language institute, and accept the fact that it is necessary for them to succeed in school and beyond. Classes tend to be small, relaxed and to some extent, fun. They attend four classes per week: Grammar and listening are taught by highly proficient Koreans in the mother tongue while writing and speaking are taught by native English speakers exclusively in the TL. Herein lies the problem.

Most student interaction at my school is in their mother tongue, which hardly provides them with any exposure to the TL. Native speakers are discouraged from using any Korean in class, including

dictionaries, which leads to significant difficulties (especially at the highest levels). Therefore, students are either hardly using the TL at all (because they are studying grammar and listening or socializing in their mother tongue with their teachers/peers) or are experiencing near 100% TL use in my classroom setting. This abrupt switch causes confusion, disciplinary issues, learner anxiety and a host of other issues.

These examples are not the only problems. For instance, the vast majority of my peers and I have little to no fluency in the students' mother tongue. Therefore, it is not practical for me to implement the L1 to any meaningful extent. Beyond a few words used for discipline, clarity, socialization, and the use of a dictionary to translate, the use of the L1 advocated by the examples I have provided is nearly impossible and extremely difficult at best. However, I still feel the L1 has a sanctioned, disciplined role in the L2 classroom. As I will show, a limited, precise and tactful use of the L1 can be quite effective.

4.0 Arguments for and applications of the L1

With my current context and these issues in mind, in the next section I would like to explore the uses of the L1 in the L2 classrooms, and how they may apply to my situation.

4.1 Learner Anxiety

Alleviating learner anxiety is a common argument for the use of L1. A frequent problem among teachers of young learners, especially those who teach within East Asia, is that of learner anxiety and an unwillingness to speak, or at least speaking with confidence. It is important to note that Korean students have relatively more anxiety with oral performance than learners from other countries (Truitt, 1995). The vast majority of my classes are speaking centered (conversation, speech, debate), and I therefore encounter significant student anxiety. This is an issue which could potentially cripple a student's learning and improvement, and must be carefully considered. Quite often (especially with

students who are not familiar with me), learners are hesitant to speak in class. While this is not always the case, many of my students feel anxiety when speaking in front of their peers and teachers for various reasons.

Meyer (2008) breaks down the sources of language anxiety into three parts:

1. Communication apprehension; students' inability to express themselves.
2. Social evaluation; the fear of a negative social impression.
3. Tests and evaluation.

He feels that “allowing the use of the first language in the classroom will mitigate all three components” (151). These assumptions are also validated by Levine (2003) in his study of 600 first and second year university-level second language students. His study “hypothesized that the amount of instructor and student TL use correlates positively with the students’ sense of anxiety about TL use (i.e., more TL use co-occurs with greater TL-use anxiety)” (346).

In my context, I feel the social aspect of anxiety is the most relevant. Young learners are extremely susceptible to the positive and negative feedback received from their peers and that manifests itself almost daily in my classroom. As I mentioned above, apprehension is also an issue that I must contend with.

To elaborate, Saville-Troike (2006) presents four 'complex issues' which should be kept in mind with regard to anxiety:

1. Lower anxiety may facilitate language learning and success may improve self confidence.
2. Classroom context and oral focused performance generates more anxiety.
3. Personality as well as cultural differences play a role (This cultural influence will be explored in greater detail later as it has a significant impact on the current author's personal teaching environment).
4. Low anxiety and high self confidence increase motivation outside the classroom; it is still unclear if lower anxiety directly promotes learning or higher confidence is the key.

She states that “anxiety correlates negatively with measures of L2 proficiency including grades awarded in foreign language classes, meaning that higher anxiety tends to go with lower levels of

success in L2 learning" (90).

These examples show that students are more relaxed and better equipped to learn a new language when their anxiety is relieved. Experience, common sense and anecdotal evidence has taught me that a relaxed, confident student is more likely to be successful in the L2 classroom, especially when speaking is the focus. In my case, the use of the L1 can provide humor, socialization and reassurance. Furthermore, students seeing my struggles with language gives them perspective on their own learning difficulties. All of these factors contribute to the L1 lowering the anxiety of my current students. The L2 teacher can therefore be confident in using the L1 as a way to lower student anxiety, and in turn, increase competence and learning.

4.2 Further uses of the L1

The L1 has numerous other functions in the L2 classroom outside of the easing of learner anxiety. Atkinson (1987) states that it has a variety of roles to play at all levels and is consistently undervalued. These roles include eliciting language, checking comprehension, complex instructions at basic levels, co-operating in groups, explaining classroom methodology, using translation to highlight a recently taught language item, checking for sense, testing, and developing circumlocution strategies (242-246; Schweers, 1999:7 Appendix Table 1). He also gives three practical reasons for its usage:

1. It is a learner-preferred strategy; students will translate without the encouragement of teachers. Equating target language to the mother tongue is natural.
2. It offers a humanistic approach, but students should be encouraged to explain in English.
3. L1 usage is more time efficient when explaining. (242-246).

This is not a call for excessive L1 use. Atkinson warns of the over usage of the L1; it leads to over dependence, crude translation, lazy interactions and unfocused rhetoric (246). Harbord (1992) is also concerned with potential over usage. He feels L1 usage should be specific, exact and used to enhance

understanding. He cites Duff (1989: 51) who uses translation of only single words or phrases, *in context*. Allowing a small amount of translation helps students to understand, while keeping the essence of the text intact, creating an environment of greater awareness and understanding (355).

I occasionally allow students to use a dictionary for translation if a particular subject is difficult or new. It allows them to quickly understand concepts while staying on task. It increases confidence because students do not dwell on their lack of vocabulary or inability to express themselves. My use of the L1 is limited due to both my lack of language and the fear of the potential issues listed above. Therefore, I feel that my use of the L1 in my classroom is acceptable in this respect since it is explicit and meant to help the learner. In the following section, an exploration of research findings will further show how this precise use of the L1 can facilitate learning of the L2.

5.0 Arguments against the usage of the mother tongue

Unfortunately, there is still a contingent of teachers, scholars and government officials who feel the mother tongue has little to no place within the classroom. Arguments vary, from the subconscious way one learns to time constraints and lack of exposure. In this next section, I will examine how using L1 in the classroom might negatively affect a learner's ability to adopt a second language based on research by dissenters and how this would influence its use in my teaching environment.

5.1 Comprehensible input

The legacy of Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis is one reason why L1 use is frowned upon in L2 classrooms. His hypothesis states that students acquire language through understanding new input that is above their current level (This is represented as *comprehensible input*+1 or *i*+1). Language learners may only understand part of the teacher's meaning, and are gradually introduced to new concepts using the target language based on what they are already capable of understanding (e.g. A student may be

asked to pick up a 'pencil', which they understand. Next, they will be asked to pick up another object, such as a 'pen', which is not understood. They will then naturally make the connection and therefore acquire the new vocabulary). Their grammar and syntax need not be perfect (especially in early stages), with the understanding of meaning being most important. This allows students to learn in a 'natural' way similar to their acquisition of their mother tongue. Therefore, Krashen's theory calls only for the use of the TL since L1 use would interfere in this natural process (1981, 1982).

These claims, while highly influential, have received a significant amount of criticism. White (1987) claims Krashen has 'failed', saying "we must either demonstrate that anything an L2 learner does incorrectly can be circumvented by some other aspect of the positive input, or we must be prepared to say that totally successful L2 acquisition is never possible on such a theory" (107). Macaro's (2005) analysis of code-switching reinforces this statement. He explains that code-switching is seen as normal and often fundamental for L2 acquisition (63) and "flies in the face" of comprehensible input and negotiation of meaning (64-65). He asserts that "it is not surprising and entirely natural that students should codeswitch in order to achieve a task, the 'management language' of which they have not been taught. They are, after all, negotiating meaning by using a communication strategy in order to compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge" (67).

Krashen's theories do not hold up in real world usage, specifically in my current teaching environment. As an example, my students benefit tremendously from their ability to code-switch. It allows them to clarify meaning, participate in group activities, and fill in linguistic gaps. Students think in the L1, and find it easy to communicate to one another and prepare for a task in the mother tongue. As long as the discourse in L1 is on task, the use of the mother tongue is helpful for students to understand and progress naturally beyond what they know (which Krashen advocates) and is one of my primary goals as a teacher.

5.2 Exposure

Perhaps the best argument for the sole use of L2 in the classroom would be that of exposure, or a lack thereof. Scholars agree that it is critical for students to receive as much of the TL as possible (Peng & Zhang, 2009: 213). However, the influence of Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis mentioned above has created an environment where teachers are fearful of any L1 use because languages should be learned with the least amount of outside interference as possible, similar to how children learn their mother tongue. Swain (1985) has similar arguments, claiming that students must use the target language as much as possible in order to master it. Mayfield (2005) seems to back up these claims when she only spoke Spanish to her level 1 classes. While her students "felt that it was more challenging" and "frustrated", in the end they felt they had learned more and were more spontaneous with their language (5).

The idea of maximum exposure seems to have been affirmed by studies showing positive correlations between TL use and classroom achievement (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009: 3). It has also inadvertently led to a "blind acceptance" that TL acquisition is only available through maximum usage of the L2 (3-4). Levine (2003) found that the prevailing "'recourse-to-L1' position has created a classroom dynamic in which the use of the L1 is at best discouraged, and at worst stigmatized" (344). The 'virtual position' (i.e. maximum TL use) admittedly sounds logical but it is clear that it is neither practical nor beneficial to the student. "Research findings indicate that the first language may contribute to student target-language comprehension, use and learning. Moreover, and contrary to the popular belief supported by the hegemony of the virtual position, small amounts of first language use may indeed lead to more comprehensible input and target-language production" (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009: 5). This conclusion that 100% TL use is unnecessary for a successful second language classroom is also supported by Timor (2012) who found that "the sole use of the FL by the teacher is not justified theoretically or practically" (9).

As an example, Liu, Ahn, Baek & Han (2004: 605) surveyed South Korean high schools after the Ministry of Education advocated the maximum use of English. Students and teachers agreed that more TL use was necessary (32% to 50-60%), but the researchers ultimately found that “code switching will be the norm in Korean high school English teaching for a long time” (632). This conclusion resonates in my classroom particularly well. My students have limited time with native speakers in the classroom environment (let alone outside), and should be exposed to the TL a significant amount. But as the research has shown, sanctioned L1 use can have a positive effect on learners and should not be dismissed because it disagrees with the prevailing paradigm.

This idea that exposing to students to as much English as possible, regardless of level, context, or ability is quite prevalent in South Korea (which in turn, greatly affects my current teaching context). Many students in my current school, while competent, are often in levels well above where they should be. This is due to their age, parents' opinions or time they have spent at the school or at a certain level. When much of the input they receive in the L2 is beyond their comprehension, making the use of the L1 not only beneficial, but necessary. I believe that the deliberate us of the L1 in my classroom allows for better time management, communication and eventually, genuine exposure.

6.0 Conclusions

Student's mother tongues and the TL they are learning are inextricably linked. Unless a student naturally acquired a second language as a child, the L1 will always have an effect on the L2. Therefore it is impractical to eliminate the use of the MT from the L2 classroom. Students will always use strategies they are comfortable with, the foremost of them being their mother tongue. As I have shown, research and scholars agree that the mother tongue has a role in the second language classroom.

I also feel that strategically using the L1 in my classroom would be an effective way to achieve results similar to the ones presented in the various studies examined above. Although I do not have the depth

of language a bilingual would have at their disposal, I would be able to apply such strategies such as clarifying statements, translation (dictionary) and classroom management.

Using the L1 saves time, creates a more relaxed learning environment and allows students to contextualize vocabulary. I have also found that a small amount of L1 usage for socialization goes a long way in the classroom. L1 use is an excellent way to lower anxiety, check for understanding, and to make students laugh. When students feel at ease, they are more prepared to learn the L2.

A second language students' goal is acquisition, and they should have as many tools as possible at their disposal. While there is hardly a consensus on the issue, second language acquisition theory and research findings make it clear that the use of a student's mother tongue has a role within the classroom. Its implementation, amount of usage, and effects are still debated, but it is undeniably a natural part of learning a second language that students and teachers will deal with for the foreseeable future.

7.0 Appendix

Table 1

Suggested Uses for the L1 in the EFL Classroom

1. ***Eliciting language*** "How do you say 'X' in English?"
2. ***Checking comprehension*** "How do you say 'I've been waiting for ten minutes' in Spanish?" (Also used for comprehension of a reading or listening text.)
3. ***Giving complex instructions to basic levels***
4. ***Co-operating in groups*** Learners compare and correct answers to exercises or tasks in the L1. Students at times can explain new points better than the teacher.
5. ***Explaining classroom methodology at basic levels***
6. ***Using translation to highlight a recently taught language item***
7. ***Checking for sense*** If students write or say something in the L2 that does not make sense, have them try to translate it into the L1 to realize their error.
8. ***Testing*** Translation items can be useful in testing mastery of forms and meanings.
9. ***Developing circumlocution strategies*** When students do not know how to say something in the L2, have them think of different ways to say the same thing in the L1, which may be easier to translate.

Strategy	Spanish	English
negative antonym	*vivo*	not dead
simplification/ approximate synonym	*fue vergonzoso*	it was terrible
circumlocution	*se mostró reacio*	he didn't want to do it
simplification	*el precio del viaje se compensa por lo lo barata que es la vida*	the ticket's expensive but life's cheap there
explanation	*pulpo*	it lives in the sea, it's got eight legs

ADAPTED FROM "THE MOTHER TONGUE IN THE CLASSROOM" BY DAVID ATKINSON.

TABLE 1

(Schweers, 1999:7)

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