

## Issues in English Language Teaching : The Use of L1 in Teaching and Learning

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### Abstract

The paper discusses the issue of using the first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom and states the debate that has been aroused long time ago. The author also reflects her opinion on using Arabic language (L1) in English language (L2) context, and the influence of Grammar Translation Method negatively on the learners. It also discusses the advocates reasons for using L1 in L2 classrooms and the reasons for those who contradict with this method. Thus, it states the difference between the monolingual approach and the bilingual approach, explaining each the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, focusing on the contradiction of the monolingual approach with the theories of second language acquisition (SLA), and discussing the arguments that had been aroused due to the use of the first language (L1). The paper also discusses the factors that influence the use of L1, including the function namely “medium-oriented goals” and “frame goals”. Overall, it sums up the arguments and the debate that were caused by the using of L1 in L2 classroom, and the difficulty of avoiding L1 in second language classes due to some of its benefits and facilitation of delivering the language to the learners.

Keywords: L1 (First Language), L2 (Second Language), SLA (Second Language Acquisition)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of using learners' L1 in L2 classes has been a subject to a long term debate amongst researchers, academicians, teachers' trainers, and teachers. Addressing this issue, a significant number of researchers discouraged the use of L1 in L1 classes. These build their argument on the assumption that L2 learners must be exposed to and practice the maximum amount of L2 class in in order to develop their language skill. This approach has been subject to much debate. A large number of scholars began to advocate the use of L1 in L2 instructions. This paper is intended to discuss the issue and to reflect on the author's opinion in using L1 (Arabic) in L2 (English) classes in her teaching context.

#### 1. THE USE OF L1 IN L2 CONTEXT

##### 1.1 Historical Background

Before embarking on the cases for and against the use of L1 in L2 context, it is important to have a quick look at the history of using L1 use in the L2 classroom. In general, all through history there have been different methods of teaching L2 which varied in regard to the use of L1 in classrooms whether by learners or teachers. For centuries, the norm

was to use bilingual methods in teaching foreign languages. As such, the use of L1 in the L2 classroom was a universal concept. The acceptance of such methodology was due to the emphasis then on reading and writing (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This was theoretically labeled Grammar Translation Method (GTM). The prevalence of GTM usually led to the inability of learners, who had studied English for long times using GTM, to produce fluent English.

This perceived deficiency of the GTM, and subsequently of the bilingual methods, led to a shift towards the widespread adoption of English-only (or monolingual) methods. In addition, the shift towards the spoken word in the nineteenth century necessitated the shift towards the exclusion or at best minimizing the use of L1 in L2, i.e. adopting a monolingual (English-only) approach took place (Miles, 2004).

Nevertheless, the use of L1 and translation in L2 classes again begin to receive growing support from linguists and language instructors during the last three decades. Indeed, some teaching methods that deliberately involve the L1 have appeared including alternating language approaches; the methods that actively create links between L1 and L2 such as the "New Concurrent Method" and the "Community Language Learning (CLL)"; and the so-called "Dodson's Bilingual Method" which implies the use of L1 interpretation rather than translation in L2 classes (Cook, 2001).

## **1.2 Approaches to the Use of L1 in L2 Teaching**

Nunan (1999, cited in Pacek, 2003) argues that there is no fixed method of using L1 that can be suitable for all L2 teaching contexts. In other words, in the search for a "best method" will result in no fruitful theory (Lewis, 1993). Two approaches have appeared with regard to using the L1 in EFL teaching: The Monolingual approach and the Bilingual approach. In this section, we will see how L1 is used in teaching by exploring the two dominant approaches to the Use of L1 in L2 teaching, i.e. monolingual approach and bilingual approach.

### **1.2.1 Monolingual Approach**

As indicated above, in response to the failure of Grammar Translation Method in developing L2 learners' language skills, the so-called "Direct Method" and "Audio-lingual Method" came to put more emphasis on the spoken word. This Monolingual Approach had been emphasized and strengthened during the twentieth century. Advocates of the new approach banned the use of L1 in L2 classes. Later, the communicative approach obligated the pure use of English in EFL classes (Mahmoud, 2006).

The proponents of the monolingual approach ban the use of L1 in L2 classes because it hampers the learners' acquisition of the target language. The approach requires both teachers and learners to use the target language as a sole medium of communication within the classroom. The objective of encouraging the use of the target language in class is to develop learners' linguistic skills as "the more understudies are presented to English, the more rapidly they will learn; as they hear and utilize English, they will disguise it to start to think in English; the main way they will learn it is whether they are compelled to utilize it" (Sharma, 2006: 80). Closely related to the rule of not using L1 in class, the

monolingual approach takes the ideal teacher of L2 should be a native speaker (Miles, 2004).

The proponents of the monolingual approach propose more than one explanation behind their position. As Al Agha (2015) puts it:

First, using L1 may become a habit resorted to whenever any difficulties arise. Other than that, this use might be misleading sometimes owing to differences existing between the L1 and the FL. They add that when L1 is used, errors might emerge owing to negative L1 transfer. As an example, difficulties for Arab learners may be related sometimes to the different syntactic structures of sentences in Arabic and English. While Arabic has a V-S-O sentence structure, English generally follows the S-V-O pattern. (p.12-13)

For the above reasons, Krashen (1985) advocates that the need for language students to be exposed to maximum amount of the target language because the acquisition of the new language depends on exposure. In addition, Krashen and Terrell (1983, cited in Al Agha, 2015: p.13) "argue that learners acquire FL following the same path they acquire their L1. Therefore, the use of L1 should be minimized". Based on a study of Arab learners of English in the Gulf region, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989, cited in Al Agha, 2015) suggest that the use of L1 should not be frequent in foreign language classes, because this will eventually hinder the desired objective of the foreign language teaching which is "to approximate near-native competence" (p.13).

### ***1.2.2 Bilingual Approach***

The subject of using L1 in L2 classes witnessed a significant development starting the 1990s. In reaction to the restrictions put by Monolingual Approach on the use of L1, it received much criticism from researchers and language teachers. A growing number of studies and papers concluded that there are some inherent benefits for the use of L1 in FL classes. Thus, the use of L1 must not be totally banned from L2 classes.

As the use of L1 in L2 classes is becoming not a taboo any more, a significant deal of empirical research is being done on the best suitable method for using L1 in English classes. Supporting this case, there is a considerable body of research advocating the use of L1 in L2 classes. Researcher such as Atkinson (1987, 1993); Macaro (2001); Deller and Rinvoluceri (2002); Widdowson (2003); Aurbuch (1993, 1998) Harbord (1992); Grim (2010); and Lewis (2009) suggest that L1 is an effective source that can be utilized to improve learners' FL skills. They argue that using L1 is a natural act by learners and should contribute effectively in the FL learning process.

Proponents of the Bilingual Approach defended their attitude using various arguments. Some argue that the total ban of L1 in L2 classes will hinder the L2 acquisition process because this will not be practical and deprives the learner from a very useful resource for language acquisition (Macaro, 2001). In a similar vein of research, Aurbuch (1998) stresses the positive effect of using L1 in L2 classroom. Additionally, he argues that the using L1 helps in performing functions such as: language analysis, class management, presenting grammar rules, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors and checking for comprehension (adapted in Sharma, 2006: 81). Similarly, Mukattash (2003: cited in Al Agha, 2015: 14), agrees that the effective use of L1 in EFL classes should

"facilitate both teaching and learning, systematize comprehension of EFL structures and items and hence leads to meaningful learning." Likewise, Brooks and Donato (1994: adapted from Pan & Pan, 2010) suggest that "the L1 enables students to negotiate meaning and communicate successfully in the TL". Some scholars argue that "the avoidance of L1 use denies TL learners a valuable educational tool" (Pan & Pan, 2010: 89). Furthermore, certain research takes an experimental form, as some countries, such as China (Zhou, 2003), began to officially experiment the use of "bilingual English classes"(p6). However, it should be stated that almost all proponents of the bilingual approach concede that the use of L1 in L2 classes must be principled

### **1.3 The Case against the Use of L1 in L2 Classes**

In her critique of the arguments presented by the proponents of the monolingual approach, Cook (2001) summarizes that they build their case against the use of L1 in L2 classes around the following fundamental principles:

1. The learning of an L2 should model the learning of an L1 (through maximum exposure to the L2).
2. Successful learning involves the separation and distinction of L1 and L2.
3. Students should be shown the importance of the L2 through its continual use (Cook, 2001, p. 412).

Proponents of the monolingual approach heavily build on the first point, i.e. maximum exposure to L2 in class. Ellis (1994) argues that when learners become independent on the L1 they will be able to acquire the target language as the frequent use of L1 is likely to render the learner a state of dependency on his/her L1. Many others such as Hawks (2001), Krashen (1985), Lewis (1993), Lewis and Hill (1992), and Sharma (2006) advocate the principle that maximum exposure to L2 and minimum of even no use of L1 is crucial in language acquisition and linguistic skill development.

The separation and distinction of L1 and L2 is widely expressed by the supporters of the Monolingual Approach. This is raised mainly against translating between L2 and L1 in L2 classes. The point here is that frequent use of translation in class leave the learner with a belief that there is typically 1 to 1 equivalents between the languages, and this is not a fixed rule (Pacek, 2003 adapted in Mile, 2004). Therefore, they discourage the use of L1 in L2 classes in order to keep the two languages distinct and separate.

As to third point, proponents of monolingual approach argue that the exclusive use of L2 is most likely to exhibit the importance of L2 and depict the use of the language usages of the subject L2 (Pachler and Field, 2001).

In addition to the above three points, proponents of monolingual approach argue that using L1 in L2 classrooms contradicts with theories of second language acquisition (SLA), which "advocate modified input and negotiation in L2 as a means of learning" (Polio, 1994, p156). Weschler (1997) remarks that such negotiation of meaning through using L1 is likely to lead to what is called „interlanguage“ as the leaners begin to use a mix of L1 and L2 to communicate in the target language.

Another argument against the use of L1 in L2 classes is that there are multilingual classrooms which include language learners with different first languages. Based on this fact, the use of any certain first language would be futile and will hinder the target language

acquisition process. To use L1 in such classes requires the teacher to be able to speak all respective L1s in his class. Otherwise, there would no foreseen advantage of using L1 in such classroom (Hawks, 2001).

#### **1.4 The Case for the Use of L1**

While advocates of monolingual approach discourage the use of L1 in L2 classrooms (Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1982; Macdonald, 1993), those researchers still agree that this is strategy is intended only to develop the L2 proficiency through exposure to L2. However, this strategy deprives learners of valuable inputs from their L1. In general, it is not harmful to use L1 in L2 classes (Turnbull, 2001). Indeed, as Macaro (2005) argues, the banning of using L1 will result in "input modification" in the learners' use of L2. Learners will tend to modify their L2 inputs to be easier in communication. They will not be successful in acquisition of complex structures. Eventually, learners will suffer negative effects in their interaction due to the absence of L1 input.

In the movement to promote the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, advocates of bilingual approach put forward four main justifications for the use of L1 in L2 classrooms (Manara, 2007). Firstly, bilingual approach advocates argue that the learner's L1 is a valuable resource from which they draw their knowledge of L2. Learners' knowledge of L1 helps them in learning L2 as they refer to such linguistic schemata frequently to facilitate their acquisition of L2. While she confirms the usefulness of L1 at all levels of L2 proficiency, Auerbach (1993) recommended the use of L1 especially in the early stages of L2 acquisition. Similarly, Nation (2001) concedes that the use of L1 is an effective strategy in vocabulary building.

Secondly, some scholars advocate the use of L1 translation in L2 classes based on the fact that this "is a preferred learning strategy" (Atkinson (1987, p. 42)). Others argue that translation is natural and that correlating lexical items and structures from L2 to that of L1 cannot be avoided. Danchev (1982, cited in Harbord, 1992, p. 351) states that "translation is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition even where no formal classroom learning occurs". This means that such correlation and translation is performed inevitably by learners even if L1 is not used in class.

Thirdly, it is argued by scholars that the use of L1 in L2 classes creates a positive learning environment and lowers the learners' anxiety of the TL. This would help learners' progression in the acquisition of L2. In a similar vein, Auerbach (1993) suggests that the use of L1 turns the language to a meaning-making tool, i.e. a means not an end.

Fourthly, as Manara (2007: 146) concludes, "L1 can be used as a tool for thought". Upton & Lee-Thompson (2001) argue that L1 can be a 'scaffold help' between learners of L2 to be used to bridge comprehension gaps and create a cognitive space in which a learner can build his/her own understanding of L2 input. Thus, it is improper to deny learners

this rich tool of learning by banning the use of L1 in class. This most apparent in collaborative learning contexts where L1 mediates the learners' thinking.

### **1.5 Factors Influencing the Use of L1**

The use of L1 in L2 classes can be influenced by a numerous of factors which affect the teachers' decision to use L1 in the classroom. Among these factors is the function for which L1 is used. Experimental studies show that teachers use L1 in L2 classrooms for two categories of functions, namely "medium-oriented goals", which are related to learning instructions, and "framework goals", which is related to the classroom management (Ellis, 1994). Others add "social goals" such as when teacher tries to express empathy in class (Kim and Elder, 2008). The amount of L1 use depends on the function of L1 in the class context,

Another factor influencing L1 use is the desire by teacher to create class unity (Camilleri, 1996) or identify learners' individual identity (Ellis, 2007). Researchers indicate that such factors should be viewed in correlation with the learning process.

It should be noted also that in this regard that the use of L1 in class is affected by classroom experience. It does not depend on a pre-determined objective designed by the teacher. According to Levine (2003), the teachers' use of L1 is subject to localized and subjective conditions. It is not influenced by teachers' training. It is also not prescribed by school or government policy. In addition, research proves that teacher's training policy has no much to do with the teachers' actual use of L1 in classrooms (Macaro, 2001). Thus, one of factors influencing using L1 in classroom is the teachers' own discretion to do so for whatever classroom purpose.

## **2- ASPECTS OF THE USE OF L1 IN L2 TEACHING AND LEARNING CONTEXT**

### **2.1 The Facilitating Role of L1 in ESL Classes**

Through more than three decades, a large number of studies have tackled the advantages of utilizing L1 as a pragmatic tool in learning a TL. Several studies draw attention to the facilitating role of L1 in L2 classes. In a study exploring the role of L1 in communication in L2 classroom, Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) analyzed the discourse of students in a Spanish-speaking university. They found that "the L1 was an essential tool for making meaning of text, retrieving language from memory, exploring and expanding content, guiding their action through the task, and maintaining dialogue" (p.60). In a similar study, Hsieh (2000, adapted in Pan & Pan, 2010) discovered that "translation, one way of using L1, improved her college students' ability to read English in terms of reading comprehension, reading strategies, vocabulary learning, and cultural background knowledge" (p.88).

Cook (1997) argues that even advanced L2 learners need L1 input to effectively comprehend L2 structure. In a later work, Cook (2001, p.418) concludes her paper suggesting some uses of L1 in classrooms as follows:

- To provide a short-cut for giving instructions and explanations where the cost of the L2 is too great.

- To build up interlinked L1 and L2 knowledge in the students' minds
- To carry out learning tasks through collaborative dialogue with fellow students
- To develop L2 activities such as code-switching for later real-life use

L1 is also vital in some L2 classes where L1 is used by teachers as a facilitation tool in the teaching/instruction process itself. Mart (2013) concludes, based on a review of some penetrating studies, that:

To ensure that students fully understand what to do, instructions should be given in L1 and the use of L1 is beneficial to convey meaning and explain grammar. Furthermore, it is useful for students if they use L1 while comparing their answers in groups which will lead them to an understanding of L2 better. (p.11)

## **2.2 Application of L1 Use in ESL Classes Activities**

Research has found that learners' native language can play very important roles in improving their language skills and sub-skills. It also plays a similar role in classroom activities designed by teachers (Nazary, 2008). Successful learners utilize their skills and knowledge acquired through their L1 to acquire the target language (Butzcamm, 2003). Mattioli (2004, adapted in Nazary, 2008: p.124) mentions five functions of L1 in an EFL classroom. They are: "explaining vocabulary, giving instructions, explaining language rules, reprimanding students, and talking to individual students". As such, L1 proves to be play a vital role in teaching the four language skills (i.e. reading, listening, writing and speaking), as well as language sub-skills (i.e. vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and culture). The mother tongue is utilized effectively in applying classroom activities related to these skills.

Research also found that in the reading activities which include certain amount of L1, learners prove to be better than in activities limited to TL use only (Nuttall, 1996; Koren, 1997). Other research found that even in inner mental activities, students use their L1 in generate ideas for their L2 writing activities (Auerbach, 1993; Hamid and Majid, 2006). In addition, it is argued that bilingual/bicultural teachers are capable of enriching the classroom learning process through their principled use of L1 to improve the learners' awareness of L2 (Dujmovic 2007; Gill, 2005 adapted in Nazary, 2008: p.125).

## **2.3 An Approach to the Amount of L1 Use in Teaching Contexts**

The amount of L1 in teaching contexts has been a subject to considerable research. In this regard, both teachers' use and learners' use of L1 matter. The following is an approach to the optimal Amount of L1 Use in Teaching Contexts.

### **2.3.1 Teachers' Use of L1**

The teachers' use of L1 is most important here, as teachers control the medium of communication within the classroom and they use L1 for different objectives. Tang (2002, cited in Afzal, 2013: p. 1847) argues that "L1 is used by teachers in beginning and intermediate classes to give instructions; explain meanings of words; explain complex ideas;

and explain complex grammar points". Tang further qualify this use of L1 noting that such use must be supportive to the use of L2 and second to it rather than being a main medium, of communication within class. Thus the amount of teachers' use of L1 is controlled by the type of function played by L1 and in all cases must be a secondary medium of communication with classroom.

### ***2.3.2 Students' Use of L1***

Similar to teachers' use of L1, students use their L1 in classroom as a medium to help them expressing their ideas or forming meanings in different learning context. Afzal (2013) states that students use L1 while in classroom to:

- ask each other clarifying questions
- express frustrations concerning their lack of understanding
- clarify meaning of words in L2
- find new words in L2 which correspond to already known words in L1
- use language to process complex concepts
- build shared meaning while evaluating written tasks through shared discussion (p.1848)

Again, the amount of L1 use by students is controlled by the need to form meaning and develop cognitive skills within the L2 learning process. Although the use of L1 is helpful for students in classrooms, they must use L2 as well and in greater amount than L1.

## **2.4 The Positive Effects of L1 Use in the L2 Classroom on English Improvement**

It is widely maintained now that the use of L1 in L2 classroom is not necessarily a hindrance to the L2 acquisition or learning. Research conducted by (Dulay & Burt, 1973) has revealed that only 3% of the difficulties and errors of foreign language learning can be attributed to the use of L1. Thus, the positive effect of L1 use clearly outweighs the negative one. Furthermore, the use of L1 is beneficial for language learning because it promotes the learners' interest in the tasks being done in class (Anton and Dicamilla, 1998). This way, the use of L1 fosters the improvement English language skills.

Based on empirical research, the use of L1 could lower learning stress, foster learners' inclusion into classroom activity, and create a more inclusive and positive learning environment (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Levine, 2003). Researchers advocate the use of L1 in explaining the complicated tasks, especially to lower level students (Weschler, 1997)). The author here (working as EFL teacher) find this last strategy to be very useful with adult Arab students of English in Kuwait. This strategy was applied by the author in a beginner level course. In my view, the Arabian Gulf students in this level usually waited for the Arabic translation to feel that they are involved in the classroom activities.

## **2.6 Official Attitudes towards Use of L1 in Teaching Context**



Although research has proved the empirical advantages of using L1 in L2 classrooms, most of the government and official attitudes towards the use of L1 in classrooms follow the general rule of English-only. This is justified by the concern of governments to avail the maximum L2 exposure to students. In this context, Lu et al. (adapted in Pan and Pan, 2010: 88) state that "several Asian countries in which English is a foreign language (e.g., Korea and Taiwan) suggest that the use of L1 be kept to an absolute minimum." However, it is perceived that teachers will continue use the L1, albeit with some sense of guilt. On the other hand, some countries like China began to officially experiment the use of "bilingual English classes" (Zhou, 2003: p6).

In Kuwait, as well as in other Arabian Gulf countries, the use of L2 is (officially) the standard practice. Minimal use of L1 is permissible. But in practice, this cannot be achieved. Most students are unable to communicate properly in English (FL). Therefore, teachers tend to maximize their use of L1 in order to engage students and foster class activities.

## CONCLUSION

In view of the above discussion, we can draw a conclusion that the debate on banning or permitting the use of L1 in L2 classrooms will continue. Each party has their own arguments which are valid and applicable. However, there will be always some points of agreement between the two parties. The advocates of the use of L1 in L2 classrooms will continue supporting their argument and qualifying the conditions controlling the use of L1. They are already against the excessive use of L1 and emphasize the optimal use of it. To sum up, the use of L1 cannot be avoided whether by teachers or learner.

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