To What Extent Should We Allow L1 in the L2 Classroom?

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Abstract: Should we allow teachers or students to use the L1 in the L2 classroom? Debate is now raging over the use of the learner's first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom. The purpose of this research is to identify the role of first language in the second language classroom. It also clarifies if the mother tongue in the classroom increases comprehension and facilitates the second language acquisition process. The use of L1 was strongly discouraged, but times have changed and there are now two opposing camps. Supporters say L1 should only be used as a tool to achieve specific aims. Although it is possible to learn a language only using L2, it's probably easier and less stressful when L1 is used in a disciplined way. Treating the L1 as a classroom resource opens up several ways to use it, such as for teachers to convey meaning, explain grammar, and organize the class, and for students to use as part of their collaborative learning and individual strategy use. The first language can be a useful element in creating authentic L2 users rather than something to be avoided at all costs. The final outcome of this research is that L1 should be allowed in the L2 classroom.

Keywords: communicate, argument, theory, comprehension, alternation, cognitive, process, bilingual.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of a student's first language (L1) in a second language classroom (L2) has been debated for numerous years (Morahan 2010) within the principles set by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Many teachers have any inherent understanding that teaching in a second language is cognitively more complex than that of a first language (He 2011). Many scholars debate the importance of L1 in the L2 classroom with various arguments related to language acquisition, how the student compartmentalizes the two languages within memory and L2 exposure within classes (Cook 2001).

Research over the preceding decades have seen an increase in ESL in the classroom and has become a critical topic of engagement not only in school but also in a wider society (Ford 2009). Evidence has shown that writers engage in their L1 even when approaching tasks set within their L2 (van Weijen et al. 2009). This indicates that there is integration between L1 and L2. This paper aims to examine some of the complexities faces by TESOL and students when facilitating the use (or non-use) of L1 in the L2 classroom and the extent to which we should encourage the use of L1.

2. THE RELEVANCE OF L1 IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

There is a vitally important role to be played by the L1 and L2 classroom with regard to the level of bilingualism that has arisen in the past 40 years (Milroy & Muysken 1995, p.1) with ever advancing technology and connectedness of nations. Colonisation has meant that the need for individuals to be able to communicate in more than one language has become imperative within modern education. There has also been a rise in secondary languages within ethnic minorities become further deep rooted in contemporary living (Ibid). However, the argument remains as to whether children learning a second language should be able to facilitate the use of their mother tongue or if it is more beneficial for the class to only be conducted in the second language.

Language acquisition has associations with the general development theories as explored by developmental psychologists such as Vygotsky and Bruner. Aspects such as the sociocultural theory of mind in second language acquisition are commonly explored (Lantolf 2000), and how language acquisition relates to current practice of L1 use in the L2 classroom. Many of the theories with regards to sociocultural theory have a relationship with the notion that the human mind is mediated. Vygotsky argued that individuals facilitate the use of 'tools and labor activity' (Lantolf, 2000, p. 1) which enables us to change our understanding of the world and the way in which we exist within it. He argued that our culture played a vital role in our understanding of language and that our understanding of the mind has enabled us to partly comprehend the levels in which cognitive actions are achieved. He further argued that language enabled children to mediate the way in which they behaved. Other followers of sociocultural theory in second language acquisition (SLA) relate to the concept of private speech in which students are able to construct and understand meaning of L2 with the use of internal L1 speech. They also argue that L2 grammar complexities are often easily understood when explained in L1, as L2 explanations cause some student's difficulties with comprehension (Lantolf, 2000, p. 31). This is where we are able to see the start of the argument developing in favour of the individual's use of L1 in the L2 classroom (even if this is not overtly used by facilitators). There are many factors that support the use of L1 in the L2 classroom alongside those which do not, and some of these shall be explored herein.

3. THE ARGUMENT FOR L1 IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

Tang suggests that to learn L2 is much the same as L1, with regards to extensive exposure (Tang 2002). That is; young children initially learn to speak their mother language through a process of exposure, to include modelling and repetition. At this point, the current paper could bring the issues surrounding language acquisition device as proposed by Noam Chomsky into the debate, with regards to the predominant ability to learn language at its strongest until approximately 4 years of age; yet the scope for this paper does not allow for such. However, it is able to give readers an idea as to why the L1 is seemingly much easier to master than that of L2 (if the beginning of L2 learning is to begin post aged 4 years).

Research has highlighted that the indication of the use of L1 in the L2 classroom actually enhances comprehension of L2 by the students (Tang 2002; Cook 2001). The alternation of languages between L1 and L2 is seen as an important criterion in some classes, and even allows understanding peers to explain in L1, the task that is being described in L2 (Morahan 2010).From personal experience, although not directly related to TESOL, teaching in L1, to a variety of students whose mother tongue is L2, gives way to peer to peer learning. It is witnessed that numerous students will facilitate their own L1, to explain to other students with equal L1, the task which is being described in L2. It is assumed that this reciprocal learning allows students a deeper comprehension of the primary language in multi-lingual classes. The aforementioned experience in part relates to the notion of the 'New Concurrent' method (Cook 2001), in which the teacher switches between L1 and L2, yet in the described example, it is the student who takes this new concurrent method on board and not the teacher. The method allows teachers to explain key points to students and to allow for a more concrete comprehension in L1 as opposed to the levels of comprehension seen in explanations purely in L2.

Some of the more radical approaches to TESOL, is that of cognates (Van Assche et al. 2009). Cognates facilitate the use of combining both L1 and L2 in a sentence, such as 'Franglais', the integration of French and English into a sentence. For example, 'Je like la crème glacee on a été chaud day' (I like ice cream on a hot summers day). After approximately two weeks, the teacher would primarily be speaking 50% French and 50% English, with further progression as time goes on. This is essence facilitates the use of code switching (Auer 1999a) which is discussed in more detail in the information against the use of L1 in the L2 classroom later in the paper. Research has shown that facilitating the use of cognates in the L2 classroom decreases reading times of students alongside a comprehension ability (Van Assche et al. 2009) and an increase in word recognition times. In fact, the authors of the research state that it is very difficult for student to turn off their dominant mother tongue and as such, expecting them to do so may be futile (Ibid). The method of cognates and the combination of the old (L1) with the new (L2) suggests that for a student to become confident in L2, there must be an acceptance of the level of use of L1 in a classroom, and in fact it should be encouraged.

If we again pick up the teachings of Vygotsky with regards to the ZPD, then expecting a student to work fully in L2 may cause them to stretch beyond their boundaries of the ZPD and as such interfere with their learning process. Lantolf & Poehner (2011) suggest that within the L2 classroom there should be dynamic assessment (DA), a framework based on Vygotskian theory which allows teachers to support the development in an active method of facilitation. This active support enables students to slowly creep beyond the realms of the ZPD without overwhelming them causing for

frustration or incomprehension. For such a method to work there needs to be the ability of the TESOL to facilitate L1 in aiding the development of the progression of the students L2.

TEACHER USE OF L1:

There are a variety of methods in which a teacher is able to facilitate the use of L1 in the classroom to enable the continuing progression of her students as cited by Atkinson (1987) such as; eliciting language, checking for students comprehension, giving out complex instructions in the most basic of levels, co-operating in groups, basic explanations of classroom methodologies, utilising translation to highlight something recently taught, checking for sense, testing and to develop circumlocution strategies, all of which become a complex tasks if they are to be described and executed in L2. Atkinson further argues that application of L1 in the classroom enables a development of fluency and argues for its inclusion. His writing came within the 1980's, a time in which there was a general trend for exclusion of L1 and as such bore the brunt of criticism. However, his explanation with regards to how L1 is utilised in the L2 classroom was clear and left little room for justified criticism.

STUDENT USE OF L1:

It is common for students in the L2 classroom, to facilitate the use of L1 in group, or pair work. The use of L1 will allow them to work and develop within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a theory well-constructed and evaluated by Vygotsky (1987) and commented on widely in second language acquisition (Escandón & Sanz 2011; Compernolle et al. 2012; Lantolf & Poehner 2011). The general assumption is that if students are able to facilitate L1 intermittently, then L2 students may process cognitively, at a much higher level, than if working in L2 alone. This in turn creates a higher level of understanding (Morahan 2010). Students are also seen to facilitate a concurrent method as aforementioned and this appears to have justifications for the use of L1 in the L2 classroom.

4. THE ARGUMENT AGAINST L1 IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

Research has highlighted that even since the 1880s, there has been this direct avoidance of the utilisation of L1 in the L2 classroom (Howatt & Widdowson 2004). According to Howatt and Widdowson (2004, p.289);

> *'...the monolingual principle, the unique contribution of the twentieth century to classroom language teaching, remains the bedrock notion from which others ultimately derive.'*

It is within such a quote that we are able to see the opposition to the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, stating that monolingual classrooms form the basis for which the successful teaching of L2 would lay. It is a fairly common theme for many teachers and academics in the field of language acquisition, that English should be rendered almost obsolete (applicable to any L1, besides English), with many textual companions only facilitating the use of L2 within materials (Halliwell et al. 1991). With regards to the way that young children learn their first language, this follows on from the principles of exposure; that students are only spoken to in L2 and L1 is obsolete. The student has to fully engage in the class activities or they will not comprehend. It is to be expected that total L2 engagement is to speed up the process in which language is acquired, as it did for L1

Difficulties arise in classes where all students have the same L1 as the teacher and are furthermore all engaged in the learning of the same L2. Students who are having difficulties with comprehension are likely to seek assistance in L1 which may be a compelling persuasion for the teacher to respond in L1, especially when an individual student is clearly distressed with confusion. The only way in which a purely L2 classroom could be achieved would be if the teacher did not speak the students L1 and all students had different L1's from one another; an unlikely circumstance (Cook 2001).

LANGUAGE COMPARTMENTALISATION:

In the literature exists arguments that successful comprehension of L2 requires that L1 and L2 are kept separate cognitively, such that they remain distinctive systems of their own, an argument which has remained prominent since the 1950's as 'Contrastive Analysis' (Lado 1957); Contrastive analysis suggests that continuous use of L2 when describing or explaining L2 terminology and language adds to the development of separate linguistical systems. It is argued that L2 should only be acquired through the use of L2 and that there should be no association with L1. The argument set by theorists with contrastive analysis was that if a student was experiencing difficulties with L2, these were likely to be linked to issues within L1, which were transferring into L2. The idea was that through pure use of L2, issues relating to

perplexity could be eliminated (e.g., the confusion between English and French sentence construction could cause an English L1 student to have difficulties with the comprehension of L2 French, due to the inherent formation structures in L1 English). However, issues are likely to arise when expecting a student to think both vocally and privately in L2.

LANGUAGE COMPARTMENTALISATION: CODE-SWITCHING:

Code switching is the theory that students are able to have both L1 and L2 'online' at a single time which means that although L2 is not facilitated by the teacher, the student is able to use a process of bilingual attention to the subject matter (Cook 2002). This is classed as a highly skilled language aptitude and is seen to require the student to be able to switch between L1 and L2 quickly and coherently. The argument here is that in everyday situations in which the student is likely to be involved, with L1 and L2, a process of code switching is most likely to be the cognitive method (Ibid). Keeping the two languages separate within teaching allows the student to become more comfortable with the ways in which they will facilitate both the interplay between L1 and L2 in conversations in L2 outside of the classroom (Stern 1992). It is highly likely that students will mediate between both L1 and L2 and as such it is almost an unfeasible task to expect the student to have internal (private) speech primarily within L2. Furthermore, it is suggested if students were to have separate cognitive functions for both L1 and L2, they would find jobs that utilise both L1 and L2 languages (interpreter/travel advisor) inherently difficult. For there to be cohesion between comprehension and production, students would need to be able to integrate both L1 and L2 in a system that allows them fluidity in their language. Code switching is explored thoroughly in the literature (Miller Amberber et al. 2009; Auer 1999b; Gardner-Chloros 2009; Milroy & Muysken 1995). Research suggests that it is a common occurrence for bilingual speakers to facilitate two or more languages within one conversation which shows very little difficulty (Gardner-Chloros 2009). It is suggested that this is code switching in process. Part of the argument made with regards to code switching is that it is a very difficult aspect to study from a scientific point of view. It includes the combination of socio linguistic, grammatical, psycholinguistic and developmental aspects which are all independent in their nature. A reductionist approach would be inappropriate in this instance yet an approach from a holism viewpoint would create difficulties with the amount of data that would need to be analysed.

If we are to develop the idea of real-world experience with regards to L1 in the L2 classroom, it should be understood that situations in which L2 would be facilitated would usually require the student to have little or no backup from L1 sources. The idea of the L2 classroom is to give students a sample of the type of interactions that they will face during real communication. A class in which L1 is commonly used is unlikely to be a valid example of real life bilingual speaking. This forms further support towards the arguments that L1 should be eradicated in the L2 classroom (Cook 2002). The reality of the situation is when teaching students in L2, there are numerous instances in which L1 acts as a facilitator, especially when the student is finding an aspect of L2 extremely difficult to understand. As a teacher you are obliged to help students and if continuing in L2 does not enable the student to develop a full understanding, then the entire aspect of 'teaching' is no longer valid.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to present arguments both for and against the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. General investigation has highlighted that ideas which relate to the complete eradication of L1 in the L2 classroom are dated and that modern approaches to L2 acquisition are more likely to include and facilitate the use of L1. Research has shown that when L1 is used alongside L2 by the TESOL, then comprehension of the L2 has increased. Some of the early theoretical foundations of language as proposed by Vygotsky with regards to the zone of proximal development are mirrored in modern methods. The use of cognates within the L2 classroom combines both L1 and L2 and allows the student to slowly progress and comprehend how the L2 fits in with their current understanding of their L1 language. It allows the teacher to scaffold their learning and therefore enables them to progress in the most productive of manners. Although the argument against the use of L1 in the L2 classroom falls predominantly on the idea that L1 is not used when a student is talking in L2, in real-world situations, it is highly likely that a student will be comparing their comprehension of L2 with the underlying comprehensions of language that they of course have in L1. Facilitators of L2 curriculums must also bear in mind the relationship between peers. Students are likely to confer with one another in L1 regarding their work that they are required to complete in L2. This further supports the idea that the use of L1 in the L2 classroom allows students to make the most beneficial progression. The same is also found in classes in which the teacher has a different L1 than that of her students. The general consensus found from this paper is that L1 should be allowed in the L2 classroom.

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