Principal Reasons for Using L1 in the L2 Classroom

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Abstract

In the last twenty to thirty years, the use of students' native language (L1) in second language (L2) or Foreign Language (FL) classrooms has been at the center of an ongoing debate within the world of Second Language Acquisition. There is a wide range of literature available dedicated to exploring the advantages and disadvantages of L1 use in language teaching and learning. The aim of this integrative review is to synthesize and report on the most commonly identified benefits of L1 use in L2 and FL classrooms. The paper begins by looking at arguments both for and against the use of L1 in L2 and FL classrooms. A discussion follows of the principal reasons L1 can assist second and foreign language learning, derived from an investigation of studies of both teacher and learner perceptions across different educational stages and environments. The most common reasons presented for L1 use are divided into three main categories: providing explanations for activities or tasks and aiding in classroom management, support for grammar instruction and translating vocabulary, and reducing affective barriers and building rapport between teachers and students. The paper concludes with limitations and suggestions for further research. The findings may have important implications for approaches to L1 use in L2 and FL classrooms and further discussion on reflective teaching practices, as well as for teacher and institutional attitudes toward L1 use and subsequent instructional policies.

Introduction

A common thread throughout academic literature concerning Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the role of the students' mother tongue in the classroom. Regardless of whether a student is studying English in Japan where there is little access to the target language (TL) outside of the classroom, or studying French in Canada where in some areas the TL is readily accessible beyond the classroom, there is a lack of consensus as to what kind and how much of a role the students' mother tongue should play in language teaching and learning. While thirty years ago teaching approaches supported the exclusive use of the TL, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of researchers and practitioners who argue that judicious use of the mother tongue can support SLA. For this reason, this paper presents a comprehensive review of the literature in the field, highlighting principal reasons for using students' first language (L1) in the second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) classroom.

Before moving on to the benefits of and reasons for using the L1, it is important to first understand the history of the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom. Popular approaches to language teaching over the past century have promoted the exclusive use of the target language, particularly after the dominance of the Grammar-Translation method, which "was not very effective in preparing students to use the target language communicatively" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 25). Littlewood and Yu (2011) noted that "since the grammar-translation approach was first challenged in the late 19th century, the monolingual principle has permeated every language teaching method that has found widespread official support" (p. 66). The next major change in SLA was the prevalent adoption of the Direct Method. In the Direct Method, instruction is carried out exclusively in the TL with no fallback on the learners' L1 (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Subsequently, many monolingual teaching methods have become part of mainstream second language teaching pedagogy. This includes Total Physical Response and the Natural Approach, two methods that find their principles largely based on the idea that language learning should mimic the way a child acquires their first language (Brown & Lee, 2015). This belief that learning an L2 should reflect the way children learn their mother tongue is a common argument for avoidance of the L1 in L2 teaching, although current understanding of SLA and First Language Acquisition (FLA) has meant that this is now a moot point:

> The comparison of L1 and L2 acquisition is a vast question … . By definition, the L1 monolingual child does not have another language; it is the one element that teaching could never duplicate … . The argument for avoiding the L1 based on L1 acquisition is not in itself convincing. It seems tantamount to suggesting that, since babies do not play golf, we should not teach golf to adults (Cook, 2001, p. 406).

Proponents of "avoidance of the L1" in the language classroom are beginning to dwindle as more research sheds light on the advantages of L1 use in the classroom (Cook, 2001, p. 404). Canagarajah (2005) agrees, arguing that students' first language should have a place in their L2 learning, remarking that "gone are the days when we treated the L1 as needing to be suppressed if one is to become a proficient speaker of an L2" (p. 941).

With the growing trend toward communicative approaches to teaching and learning, and a better understanding of the differences between FLA and SLA, the body of literature to support the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom is growing. Interest in studying the role of the L1 in the language classroom stems in part from a desire to justify its use alongside the L2. This is due to a number of factors. For teachers of a foreign language, particularly those who are living abroad and teaching in an environment where the learners all share the same L1, it can be very challenging to promote, actualize, and maintain constant use of the TL. For example, being an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher in a Non-English Speaking Environment (NESE), it can be

difficult to get through a class without resorting to the learners' L1 in some way. This is much more likely to happen when students have little to no exposure to the target language beyond the classroom, with few opportunities to use the TL in their daily lives (MacPherson, 2019). García Mayo and Hidalgo (2017) also raise this issue about the difference regarding input exposure between second language and foreign language environments. Leading up to the discussion on their analysis of primary school students using EFL for communication tasks, they note that, especially in FL situations, the TL and L1 are not the same, and therefore the TL is not used as a "means of communication" throughout the sectors of society (p. 133). In FL environments in particular, "the amount of input is highly limited, with classroom time being learners' only opportunity to actually use their L2 for developing speaking fluency" (Ford, 2009, p. 66). In other words, "only in circumstances where the teacher does not speak the students' L1 or the students have different L1s could this [avoidance of L1 use] be achieved" (Cook, 2001, p. 404).

It is for reasons such as these that teachers in NESE settings seek to justify the often unavoidable use of the L1 in the classroom. This is largely due to a sense of guilt for not using the L2 exclusively (Auerbach, 1993). Being able to assign some pedagogical worth to the use of L1 would help to relieve this sense of guilt for many (Cook, 2001; Lee & Lo, 2017). In fact, Macaro (2001) found at the conclusion of his research on possible reasons for codeswitching that one of the student teachers he had observed felt less guilty about resorting to the L1. The student teacher reasoned that finding a balance is important, and that she had "achieved results even without using the target language" (p. 541). On the other hand, L1 use must be executed prudently, and requires careful consideration of the most common reasons and benefits for doing so, as well as self-reflection and awareness on the part of the teacher as to why use of the L1 may be necessary in certain situations and whether it is truly warranted (Edstrom, 2006; Grim 2010; Macaro, 2001).

Literature Review

Based on reviews of the literature over the past thirty years, this paper provides evidence that L1 use is efficacious in certain contexts and when executed judiciously. In synthesizing the key arguments, teachers and practitioners will be made aware of reasonable contexts in which to judiciously employ the L1 when its use may support acquisition of the TL, or when teachers feel they have no choice but to use it in the language classroom. In turn, it is hoped this will help to alleviate teachers' feelings of guilt that tend to accompany their use of the L1 in the L2 classroom.

There are discrepancies in terminology within the reviewed literature that first need to be addressed. L1 refers to students' first or native language, while L2 generally refers to the second (or other subsequent) language they are learning. This second or other language may or may not be readily accessible outside of the classroom in the first language environment. The TL is often used synonymously with the L2 or FL, meaning the target language being taught or studied in the

language classroom. Many of the studies reviewed used L2, FL, and TL interchangeably. Of particular importance is the difference between SL and FL contexts, although this distinction is not necessarily honored in the literature. Brown and Lee (2015) define the "operational" difference between second and foreign language learning settings as follows:

> Second language learning contexts are those in which the classroom target language is readily available beyond the classroom … . Foreign language contexts are those in which students learn a language of other countries and do not have ready-made contexts for communication beyond their classroom. (p. 160)

For this paper, literature on L1 use in language classrooms across multiple contexts was reviewed. As a result, the terms L2 and FL are used interchangeably, with both terms also being referred to as the TL. While there is a considerable difference between the L2 and FL in relation to the varying contexts of each language classroom, the dichotomy between them has come into question with the increasing global use of English for a variety of communicative milieus (Brown & Lee, 2015). With this in mind, and due to the variety of situations presented in the literature reviewed, the terms L2 and FL are used interchangeably, with TL referring to either term.

The case for L1 use in the L2 classroom

Over the past thirty years, scholars have begun to re-examine L1 use in the context of second and foreign language teaching and learning (Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Edstrom, 2006; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Macaro, 2001; Meyer, 2008; Polio & Duff, 1994; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Literature on L1 use in SLA suggests that a judicious approach can help, and not hinder, the learning process. The three principal reasons to support the use of the L1 when teaching a second or foreign language are:

- Providing explanations for activities or tasks and aiding in classroom management.
- Supporting grammar instruction and translating vocabulary.
- Reducing affective barriers and building rapport between teachers and students.

Following are detailed explanations of each category, and the research that provides support for the use of L1 in L2 classrooms.

Activity/task explanations and classroom management

Among the research, the most commonly mentioned reason for L1 use in second language

teaching and learning is for explaining tasks and aiding in classroom management. In his findings, Macaro (2001) noted that "procedural instructions for activities figured prominently as a reason for resorting to the L1" (p. 545). It is important to note here that interpretation of the terms *activity* and *task* overlap in such a way that one is often used in place of the other. One clear example of this overlap in definitions states "a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001, p. 11). As a result, these two terms are used interchangeably in this paper. In the results of their study, de la Campa and Nassaji (2009) concluded that "occasional recourse to L1 in order to set up a complex activity will be useful and will provide students with extra learning opportunities" (p. 756). Macaro (2001) remarked that providing instructions in the L1 creates a bridge between the ideal and the attainable. Bruen and Kelly (2017) reported that students felt L1 use was necessary when explaining different difficult tasks. A questionnaire study of 52 university students established that L1 use for activity instructions aided in comprehension and alleviated confusion (Rolin-Ianziti& Varshney, 2008). Additionally, Swain and Lapkin (2000), upon observing 30 students in the 8th grade, reported that the L1 was used by learners to "help move the task along" (p. 258). This kind of task management was found to be an important reason for L1 use in much of the literature (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Bateman, 2008; Cook, 2001; Ford, 2009; García Mayo & Hidalgo, 2017; Grim, 2010; Lee & Lo, 2017; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

In addition to task explanations, researchers have found that L1 is useful for maintaining control of both the class and of lessons (de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009; Macaro, 2001). Referring to classroom management, Littlewood and Yu (2011) state that the "focus is … on the pragmatic aspects of setting up a context for learning" (p. 73). This includes discipline, an important factor assigned to classroom management. Cook (2001) concluded that the L1 is employed for the purpose of efficiency, as well as to stress the discipline is "real and not pretend" (p. 416). Macaro (2001) believes that "reprimands are … external to methodology" (p. 541) and therefore are not a cause for debate when given in the L1. Littlewood and Yu (2011) concur that the L1 is useful for "maintaining disciplined behavior" (p. 73). In summary, teachers fall back on the learners' native language for ease of communicating discipline and to make sure students understand it is real.

In addition to maintaining order in the classroom, several studies have shown that from the perspective of teachers, the L1 is useful for making classroom management more efficient (Cook, 2001; Polio & Duff, 1994). Edstrom (2006) mentions "getting off on the right foot" at the beginning of the semester by explaining her grading policies and giving tips for functioning in the TL (p. 283). De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) found recourse to the L1 for dealing with malfunctioning classroom equipment. From reasons of comprehension to efficiency and discipline, it is evident that the L1 is commonly employed to conduct classroom management for a variety of reasons.

Grammar instruction and vocabulary translation and comprehension

The second reason is for grammar instruction and vocabulary translation to support comprehension. L1 use in the context of grammar and vocabulary assistance is explored as both discrete albeit pedagogically-related items, and as separate entities. The main reasons for L1 use concerning grammar and vocabulary are basically the same: clarification and comprehension. Consequently, for this review they have been analyzed together as part of the greater pedagogical scheme.

Interestingly, the use of the L1 for grammar instruction is often connected to the concept of *metalanguage*, or using grammatical terms to discuss and comprehend grammatical forms. Several researchers found that specifically within the category of grammar, metalanguage played a key role in resorting to the L1. For example, Antón and DiCamilla (1998) observed students using their native language to produce and understand difficult grammar forms. In a task-based study, Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) reported on how students found that metalanguage in their L1 "enabled them to provide each other with definitions of difficult vocabulary and explanations of grammar" (p. 765). Likewise, Scott and de la Fuente (2008) discovered through their observations of student interaction that metalinguistic terminology provided clarity, aiding in comprehension of grammatical structures.

More generally, the L1 is used for introducing new grammar and aiding in comprehension (Carson, 2014). Through questionnaires given to university students, Carson (2014) discovered that students preferred having L1 support for grammar comprehension. Bateman (2008) remarked that several of the student teachers participating in his study found it best to use the learners' native language as a tool to guarantee comprehension. Turnbull (2001) admits that "it is efficient to make a quick switch to the L1 to ensure that students understand a difficult grammar concept or unknown word" (p. 535). Bruen and Kelly (2017) reported that both teachers and students responded favorably to the use of L1 to explain complex grammatical forms; teachers claimed it to be a "positive resource that can usefully aid the language learning process" (p. 374). In these ways, much of the literature points to L1 use as a useful tool for aiding in grammar instruction.

The role of the L1 for vocabulary translation and comprehension is also an important factor. The use of L1 for vocabulary translation and comprehension is considered to be efficient for introducing new words (Turnbull, 2001) and focusing attention on vocabulary (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). García Mayo and Hidalgo (2017) reported that the L1 performs "cognitive and social functions … . providing key vocabulary items which eventually promote communication in the L2 and language learning" (p. 134). Additionally, de la Campa and Nassaji (2009) noted that one teacher they observed translated vocabulary for the sake of efficiency. Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney's (2008) study showed that the L1 helps students "access the meaning of words … [and] also facilitates memorization" (p. 258). They found that 83% of the student participants

appreciated it when their teachers translated vocabulary. Furthermore, Carson and Kashihara (2012) found that students with low proficiency levels expressed the greatest desire for defining new words in the L1. Regarding written translation as well, Nation (2003) concluded that "the direct learning of L2 vocabulary using word cards with their L1 translations is a very effective method of learning" (p. 4). Similar reasons presented throughout the literature further solidify the role of L1 use in vocabulary-related comprehension.

Reducing affective barriers and building rapport

The final reason is reducing affective barriers and building rapport between teachers and students. In the context of affective barriers, use of learners' native language can help to reduce anxiety and stress, make the learning environment more enjoyable, foster confidence, and build rapport between teachers and students, social elements that are highly important in developing student motivation and achievement outcomes (Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Unlike the previous cognitive and pedagogical reasons for L1 use, reducing affective barriers adds a social or humanistic aspect to the equation. Brown (2014) devotes an entire chapter to affective factors in his book *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. In regard to anxiety, he writes, "Intricately intertwined with self-esteem, self-efficacy, inhibition, and risk taking, the construct of anxiety plays a major affective role in second language acquisition" (p. 150). Alleviation of what is known as *foreign language anxiety* (Brown, 2014) can help students break down these barriers and become more productive and successful language learners. Auerbach (1993) discusses the advantage of L1 as a tool for reducing affective barriers. In line with this notion, de la Campa and Nassaji (2009) found through their studies that the L1 "reduces anxiety and enhances the affective environment for learning" (p. 20). This concept is also addressed in connection to student comfort in the L1 relative to specific topics and functions (Cook, 2001).

Littlewood and Yu (2011) define the role of the L1 as "reassuring," assigning it value for discussing personal matters (p. 73). Conversely, "the absence of the student's first language when explaining the unfamiliar can raise the level of anxiety the students feel" (Meyer, 2008, p. 151). Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) looked at student views of the affective role of L1 use. They found that students felt the L1 helped alleviate negative feelings, encourage participation, and create a "comfort zone" (p. 264). Thus, it is fair to postulate that L1 use in the L2 classroom helps to reduce anxiety and other affective barriers. According to Auerbach (1993), L1 use in short "reduces anxiety and enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, [and] facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences" (p. 20).

Use of the L1 in second language settings can also assist in building rapport between students and teachers, as well as "create a comfortable and enjoyable classroom atmosphere" (Polio & Duff, 1994, p. 322). In his study conducted through interviews with native-speaker EFL teachers,

Ford (2009) found that teachers used the L1 "for humor and effect, with the purpose of creating a positive, friendly classroom atmosphere conducive to learning" (p. 71). The idea of L1 use for humor can also be seen in the results of de la Campa and Nassaji's (2009) study. Through the use of humor in the L1, teachers hope to motivate and engage students by making the learning atmosphere more comfortable. Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) also concluded that the L1 "helps to create a classroom community by fostering positive relationships between teacher and student" (p. 265). Edstrom (2006) admitted in her self-evaluation that providing a positive learning environment takes precedence over her belief that L2 use should be maximized.

Furthermore, L1 use is seen to promote confidence among students. Carson (2014) concluded that students prefer L1 use in fostering confidence. Similarly, Carson and Kashihara (2012) found that both beginning and advanced students felt the L1 necessary for encouraging confidence. Whether for promoting confidence, building rapport, alleviating anxiety, or making the learning environment more enjoyable, there are a variety of valid reasons for using the L1 in the L2 classroom.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This paper reports on the principal reasons for L1 use in the language classroom, and while it has provided important insights, there are limitations which need to be acknowledged. Firstly, some important factors did not fit within the scope of this study. For example, student proficiency levels were not taken into consideration. Proficiency levels are a prominent factor in whether students feel the L1 is necessary (Bateman, 2008; Carson, 2014; Carson & Kashihara, 2012), with beginning students demonstrating a greater desire for L1 support than more advanced students. In addition, findings were not separated by the educational level of the research participants. The views of learners from primary school to university were all synthesized for this analysis. Also connected to this factor is the idea of "differences in frequency of L1 use across institutional contexts" (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008, p. 251). Furthermore, the views of both teachers and students were grouped together. Additional research could seek to analyze the breakdown of L1 use among these different categories. Considering that research into reasons for L1 use has synthesized all of these points together, taking the time to properly collate and analyze results based on each of these factors separately could provide more nuanced insight into the benefits of L1 use in the language classroom. Moreover, this review was created through analysis of a small sample of select literature. The author could provide a more comprehensive analysis by looking at a larger sample of literature within the field.

Further research could also look into reasons for L1 use that were either rarely mentioned or did not appear in the literature at all. These include the concept of developing greater self-awareness among students about L1 and L2 connections, which would help students "notice

specific gaps in their L2 knowledge" (Polio & Duff, 1994, p. 325). In the case of teachers with multiple language capabilities, the role of the teacher as an L2 model may provide further justification for L1 use . As an aside, bilingual modes of education would also be of interest. The concept of teachers' lived experiences is also closely related to this, and may prove to be an invaluable pedagogical tool (Auerbach, 1993).

One factor mentioned infrequently as a reason for L1 use in the L2 classroom was student motivation (Ford, 2009). Many students, especially at the university level, find themselves in compulsory foreign language classes. Use of the L1 could alleviate frustration felt from being forced to learn another language, or assist in comprehension for students who find the L2 too difficult. Studies could be conducted at the university level in core FL classes to gain a better perspective of student views regarding the L1 related to motivation.

Finally, further research into self-awareness and reflective teaching could serve to better educate teachers about the advantages and disadvantages of L1 use in the L2 classroom. With proper training, teachers would be able to reflect on their own practices, determining when L1 use is or is not justified (de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009), or when conditions are ideal for maximizing use of the L2. With these extra tools, language teachers would be able to create for themselves their own set of guidelines to aid in the appropriate use of the L1 and TL in their own personal situations.

Conclusion

For thirty years, the amount of research showing judicious L1 use in second language teaching to be favorable has steadily grown. Naturally, there are both staunch opponents and enthusiastic supporters, criticizing and praising the role of the L1 in second and foreign language pedagogy. The purpose of this report was to analyze and synthesize the reasons for choosing to use the L1 in the L2 classroom, highlighting those reasons favored the most often or seen to have the most pedagogical value.

Upon analyzing the literature and highlighting the principal reasons for L1 use in the L2 classroom, those found to be most salient were task explanations and classroom management, grammar instruction and vocabulary translation and comprehension , and reducing affective barriers and building rapport between teachers and students. The use of L1 for task explanations aids in comprehension of how the task should be carried out, while also supporting discipline-related issues in classroom management. Assistance with grammar and vocabulary is executed through L1 in order to provide understanding, introduce new grammar and translate vocabulary. It also provides help with metalanguage when discussing more complex structures. Finally, the use of L1 helps reduce affective barriers connected to foreign language learning. It promotes confidence, builds rapport between teachers and students, and creates a more enjoyable learning

atmosphere.

The research literature has presented a clear justification for the use of L1 in language classrooms that can serve to validate teachers' use of the L1 and assuage any guilt they may feel based on the ideals of monolingual methods. Not only is L1 acceptable, in some cases it can be preferable to strengthen in students their cognitive skills and knowledge and foster support of their language learning, as well as to assist teachers in navigating the realities of managing complex modern classrooms.

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