

# The Facilitating Role of L1 in ESL Classes

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## Abstract

It has been widely advocated that insistence on English-only policy and the complete prohibition of L1 would maximize the effect of learning L2 but recent studies demonstrate that the appropriate use of L1 has a facilitating role in L2 classroom. This study attempts to demonstrate that the use of L1 in ESL classes does not hinder foreign language learning.

**Keywords:** First Language, Second Language, Exposure, Translation

## Introduction

The widespread belief until the last two or three decades was students' maximum exposure to the foreign language but recently there has been growing interest in the use of L1 in ESL classes. Although some theories (Krashen, 1985) claim that foreign language learning can be achieved in a learning environment where the target language is spoken, a considerable amount of attention has been given to the use of L1 in L2 learning and teaching. If the use of L1 will promote language learning and will lead to efficiency, it should not be neglected, as Cook (2001, p. 402) puts forward, "open a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over 100 years"

## The Advantages of L1 in ESL Classes

"Although the mother tongue is not a suitable basis for a methodology, it has, at all levels, a variety of roles to play which are at present consistently undervalued" (Atkinson, 1987, p.247).

The use of L1 (first language) in ESL classes has been debated for many years. There have been many arguments about the use of L1 whether it hinders or facilitates L2 (second language) learning. There is a widespread assumption that the use of L1 is not utilized in L2 learning; therefore, should be used as little as possible. A benefit of using L1 in ESL classes is students see differences between their mother tongue and second language. Prohibiting the use of students' mother tongue in the classroom will not give them the opportunity to make a comparison between L1 and L2. Furthermore, avoidance of L1 is a barrier to learners' sense of security in second language learning. Bolitho (1983) is of the opinion that the use of the native language permits the students to say what they really want to say in the target language. Willis is against banning the use of L1 but he points out that students should be engaged in learning activities in

the target language. "Don't ban mother-tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language" (Willis, 1996, p.130).

Stern argues that it is impossible to keep L1 and L2 apart and concludes that: "the L1-L2 connection is an undisputable fact of life, whether we like it or not the new knowledge is learnt on the basis of the previously acquired language" (1992, p. 282). A total ban on the use of L1 will hinder the comprehension of the target language effectively. The lack of comprehension will prevent learners from achievement; therefore, L1 should be used when it is needed. As Weschler puts "use English where possible and L1 where necessary" (1997, p.5). Nation (1997) puts forth the contribution of L1 to comprehension and points out that the use of L1 has a "small, but important role to play in communicating meaning and content" (p. 214). Macaro (2005) argues that the avoidance of L1 results in increased usage of input modification (e.g. repetition, speaking more slowly, substituting basic words for more complex ones, simplifying syntax, etc.) and this in turn might bring about negative effects in any interaction, making the discourse less realistic, reducing the lexical diversity, and eliminating exposure to complex syntax (adapted from Pan & Pan, 2010, p. 89). Schweers (1999) suggests that teachers should integrate L1 into L2 classes to improve classroom dynamics, and states: "starting with L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learner's lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves".

Nunan and Lamb (1996) state that it is impossible to prohibit the use of L1 especially at lower levels. Auerbach (1993) stresses the positive and supportive role of L1 in second language learning. In a study conducted by Schweers (1999) about the use of L1, a great number of teachers and students advocated the use of mother tongue in L2 learning. In another study by Tang (2002) about the use native language of students in EFL classes, it was found that the use of L1 does not reduce students' exposure to the target language; on the contrary, it aids the learning of the foreign language. Similarly Brooks and Donato (1994) encourage the use of L1 as it helps students with comprehension and communication effectively. Moreover, the use of translation provides students an opportunity to notice similarities and differences between L1 and L2. Particularly, Ross points out the importance of translation in foreign language learning as: "Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers" (Ross, 2000:63). Ross states that translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility (Ross, 2000:61) that will help students learn effectively.

Cook (2001, p.413) suggests some factors in using the native language positively in second language teaching: *efficiency*, if the use of L1 will be more effective in L2 learning; *learning*, if the use of L1 will contribute to L2 learning; *naturalness*, if students will feel more comfortable and confident when L1 is used in some cases, *external relevance*, if the use of both languages will help students to learn L2 effectively then the use of L1 cannot be ignored. Similarly, Harmer (2001, p.135) suggests some points that we can make in the use of L1.

- a) Acknowledge the L1: It is widely accepted that the use of L1 in L2 learning is important and should not be avoided.
- b) Use appropriate L1, L2 activities: Through using L1 grammar and vocabulary activities can be effectively done in the classroom.
- c) Differentiate between levels: As they work more in L2, their need for L1 will get less, but they may still need translation which is considered as the fifth skill.
- d) Agree clear guidelines: Students need to know when the use of L1 is beneficial
- e) Use encouragement and persuasion: Students may need encouragement to speak in L2.

Cook (2001, p. 418) suggests some uses of the mother tongue as:

- 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

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.

In particular, in some cases where learning and teaching difficulties arise, in learning vocabulary fast and comprehension of difficult concepts both the teacher and the students need to use the L1. Therefore, the use of mother tongue in foreign language teaching cannot be avoided. Tang (2002, p.37) identifies the uses for L1: classroom management, language analysis, presenting rules that govern grammar, discussing cross cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, and checking for comprehension. "in order to prevent the misunderstanding of the meaning of the new word, teachers should provide clear, simple, and brief explanations of meaning, especially in the learners' first language" ( Bouangeune,2009:189). Using L1 in L2 classes facilitates both teaching and learning, aids understanding of ESL structures and inspires meaningful learning.

Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) in their study have demonstrated the benefits of using mother tongue in foreign language and they concluded as: "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).

Atkinson (1987, p.243-244) lists the following uses of L1 in L2 classroom: 1) eliciting language, 2) checking comprehension, 3) giving instructions, 4) co-operating among learners, 4) presenting and reinforcing of language, 5) discussing classroom methodology, 6) checking for sense, 7) testing and developing useful learning strategies. Likewise, Auerbach (1993) identifies the uses of L1 as: 1) classroom management, 2) language analysis, 3) presenting rules that govern grammar, 4) discussing cross-cultural issues, 5) giving instructions or prompts explaining errors, and 6) checking for comprehension.

Piasecka (1988) lists some other uses of L1 in L2 classes: 1) Negotiation of the syllabus and the lesson; 2) Record keeping; 3) Classroom management; 4) Scene setting; 5) Language analysis; 6) Presentation of rules governing grammar, phonology, morphology and spelling; 7) Discussion of cross-cultural issues; 8) Providing instructions or prompts; 9) Explanation of errors; and 10) Assessment of comprehension.

Macaro (1997) identifies five factors to use L1 in L2 learning (adapted from Cook, 2008, p.182).

1) Using the first language for giving instructions about activities 2) Translating and checking comprehension 3) individual comments to students 4) giving feedback to pupils 5) using the first language to maintain discipline.

### **The Disadvantages of L1 in ESL Classes**

When used appropriately, the use of L1 in L2 learning can be beneficial. It is noteworthy that the excessive use of the first language should be avoided. The use of L1 in foreign language teaching cannot be seen as an easy option. Harmer (2001) states that the overuse of L1 restricts the students' exposure to the target language. The use of L1 to a great extent in second language learning will be a hindrance to achievement in the target language. Too much dependence on the mother tongue in ESL classes may have some disadvantages:

- 1) Unless it has been translated into their native language teachers or students feel that the language items will not be understood.
- 2) The teacher and/or the students fail to observe distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translation (Atkinson, 1987, p. 246).
- 3) Although students have the ability to express what they mean in the target language, they will speak to the teacher in their native language.
- 4) Students will fail to realize the importance of the second language.

Students need to encounter the target language if they want to learn it; therefore, they are to be convinced that their communicative needs are met through speaking in the target language. As Willis puts "Explain to students that if they want to communicate in the target language they need to practice" (Willis, 1996, p. 49). The speaking performance of students develops through using the target language. As Macaro writes: "Only through the learner using L2 can s/he achieve strategic communicative competence" (Macaro, 2001, p. 183). Speaking is a crucial part of foreign language learning and speaking activities are effective if they are presented in the target language. Unless they interact in the target language, students' speaking performance will not develop. Speaking activities give students an opportunity to advance their speaking skills; therefore, they will aid learning more if they are carried out in the target language.

## Conclusion

The use of L1 has been considered as detrimental in ESL classes; on the contrary, mother tongue plays a crucial and facilitative tool in foreign learning process. The benefit of using L1 in foreign language learning has been recognized by many researchers. It should be noted that L1 remains a natural resource in L2 learning. The teacher is whether native or non-native speaker, the learner is whether beginner or advanced level, the use of L1 is whether allowed or banned, the use of L1 in ESL classes cannot be avoided.

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