The Role of Learners' First Language in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

An enduring contribution of Richards Sparks' work has been his exploration of the relationship between a learner's first language (L1) and a language that he or she learns subsequently (L2). The present paper considers that relationship from the perspective of learners and teachers of a 'foreign' language in classroom settings. The paper first sets the broader context by looking briefly at the recently developed concept of 'translanguaging' and the more established notion of 'multilingual competence'. It then moves into the domain of the foreign language classroom. It outlines studies of how much, and why, foreign language teachers have been observed to use their students' L1 (often, in the teachers' own view, excessively). It argues that attempts to exclude the students' L1 have been not only impracticable but also misguided. It proposes a framework within which teachers can avoid the dangers of using the L1 excessively but also build on its potential as a support for learning.

Introduction

For much of the history of foreign and second language (L2) teaching, there has been controversy – often heated – about whether the learners' first language (L1) can play a part in facilitating L2 learning or should be avoided. At one extreme, there have been methods such as the Direct Method which have insisted on the 'monolingual principle': that the L1 should be totally excluded except as a last resort. At the other extreme, for example with the Grammar-Translation Method, many

teachers have made such extensive use of the L1 that learners' exposure to the L2 is reduced to little more than the samples printed in the textbooks.

It is more common now to adopt a more balanced view. Many teachers agree that in contexts where the teacher is the learners' main or only source of L2 input, it is important to create a classroom in which the L2 is dominant. On the other hand, they see that a policy of total exclusion does not work in practice and indeed question whether it is advisable. After all, the students' first language is a rich source of support in understanding the new language and a powerful instrument for creating learning situations.

Translanguaging

Before focusing on how teachers use (or do not use) the students' L1 in classrooms where the specific aim is to help them learn a new language, I will look briefly at a wider (or different) educational perspective on the use of two languages which has been much discussed in the last decade. This is commonly termed 'translanguaging'. A convenient summary of the translanguaging perspective can be accessed online in Vogel and García (2017). A more theoretical exploration is Li (2018) and a very useful review of four book-length treatments of the approach in practice is in Brooks (2022).

A fundamental insight which guides the translanguaging approach is that there is 'a distinction between the way society labels and views an individual's use of two named languages (the external perspective), and the way a speaker actually appropriates and uses language features (the internal perspective)' (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 5). It thus 'disrupt[s] notions of bounded language, and create[s] new subjectivities' (Brooks, 2022, p. 130), and makes us question 'traditional conceptions, such as "Language 1 (L1)" and "Language 2 (L2)," "native speaker," the notion of the pure, static "language," and even named languages such as "French," "Spanish," and "Hindi"' (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 5). From this perspective, boundaries between languages become fluid and indeed irrelevant as communication draws on the multilingual resources of the participants. Li (2018, pp. 3-6) gives two samples in which speakers navigate seamlessly between their Chinese and English linguistic resources in order to communicate their meanings. For most people who have lived in multilingual (or even multidialectal) settings, this phenomenon is part of the fabric of everyday living. Only more recently has it become subject to more explicit scrutiny, particularly with regard to its (potentially transformative) implications for educational practice and equity.

These implications have so far been explored in multilingual educational settings (see the examples in Brooks, 2022) but have not so far been systematically explored for L2 teachers who teach an 'additional' or 'external' foreign language in predominantly monolingual contexts. However, like the concept of multilingual competence, to which we will turn in the next section, the translanguaging perspective has potential to transform how L2 teachers conceive and implement their role in extending learners' competence.

Multilingual Competence

The roots of translanguaging are obviously *internal*, as speakers draw on their range of cognitive and linguistic resources. But equally obviously is has *external* manifestations, which can be

examined and analysed (as in the samples included in Li, 2018). The same is not true for multilingual competence, which refers to a person's underlying language competence and how it may contain elements from more than one 'named' language. Indeed, from the moment people begin to learn a second language and even before they utter a word, they are building their underlying multilingual competence and have the potential to use the resources of more than one language as a means of communication.

In several seminal papers, Cummins (e.g. 2007, 2014) discusses the nature of multilingual competence. He questions the theoretical basis of what he calls the 'two solitudes' assumption that has guided much bilingual education and L2 teaching. This is the belief that we should try to keep any two (or more) languages as separate as possible in the learners' minds and in our classroom practice. In contrast to this he argues for a 'linguistic interdependence hypothesis'. This hypothesis maintains that in an individual L2 learner, the two languages are like a 'dual iceberg' in which, below the surface, there is a common cognitive and linguistic basis connecting the two languages. The first language and second language are two tips of the iceberg that are visible above the surface.

From his own and other studies of L2 learning difficulties, Sparks (e.g. 2012) provides strong supportive evidence of the existence of linguistic interdependence. The conception is also developed by V. Cook, who also analyses the notion of multilingual competence, which he terms 'multi-competence'. Cook (1995, p. 94) argues that 'multi-competence is a different state of mind from monolingual linguistic competence. The knowledge of the second language is not an imitation knowledge of a first language; it's something that has to be treated on its own terms, alongside the knowledge of a first language. A single mind with more than one language has a totality that is very different from a mind with a single language.'

Cummins outlines some of the practical implications of treating the L1 and L2 as interdependent phenomena. Cook too suggests ways in which the concept of multi-competence may impact on language teaching goals, syllabuses and methods.

How Much of the Learners L1 Do L2 ('Foreign' Language) Teachers Use?

The concepts of multi-competence and translanguaging provide a superordinate conceptual framework for considering L2 learning and teaching. I will now narrow the focus of this discussion onto learning and teaching a new language in what Siegel (2003) calls 'external L2' settings. These are settings where the learners own language (L1) is the 'dominant language' and the new language (L2) is a 'foreign' language. The terminology in this area is very slippery (see e.g. Hall & Cook, 2012, pp. 273-274)) but in concrete terms, 'external L2' settings are very familiar to most L2 teachers. They include, for example, teaching English in classrooms in China or Japan, teaching French in Germany or the UK, and teaching Japanese in Hong Kong or Korea. For circumstantial reasons, most published studies in this area have involved English, either as the L2 being taught or as the learners' own L1, and much of the learning takes place in classrooms (though out-of-class learning now also attracts much attention, e.g. in Benson and Reinders, (2017) and Richards, (2015)).

Studies from around the world have revealed an immense range of variation in the extent to which L2 teachers use their students' L1, even amongst teachers in similar teaching situations. For example, in her extensive and many-faceted study of how four teachers used Chinese when teaching English at tertiary level in China, Du (2016) found that in spite of a 'common belief' that English should be used as much as possible, the teachers used learners' L1 on average for 29% of the time in the reading-and-writing course and more than 15% of the time in the listening and speaking course. Littlewood and Yu (2011) invited 50 university students from Hong Kong (HK) and Mainland China to recall the percentage of the time their teachers used L1when they were in junior-secondary-school and found that the use of L1 ranged from less than 10% to over 75%. In Korean high schools, Liu et al. (2004) reached a similar conclusion: L1 words made up between 10 per cent and 90 per cent of the words in the lessons of the thirteen EFL teachers whom they studied. This was in spite of the official national policy which mandated 'maximal use of English'. When we turn to the teaching of languages other than English, a similar picture emerges. For example, Turnbull and Arnett, (2002) found that four teachers of French in Canadian secondary schools used their students' L1 (English) between 28 per cent and 76 per cent of the time. In the classroom language of seven native-speaker secondary-school teachers of Japanese, Korean, German and French in New Zealand, Kim and Elder (2005) found that L1 use ranged from 12 per cent to 77 per cent. Mitchell (1988) reported a similar situation in modern foreign language teaching in the UK.

In interviews, many teachers in the UK study agreed that the L2 should be used as much as possible and even felt a sense of guilt in 'confessing' to using so much L1. Other studies have reported similar feelings. Why, then, do so many teachers – even native-speaker teachers – make such extensive use of their students' L1?

Why Do L2 Teachers Use the Learners' L1?
In this section, I will look briefly at some of the purposes that the L1 has been observed to serve.

In the study cited above, Littlewood and Yu (2011) asked the 50 Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese students to recall also the purposes for which their EFL teachers used the L1in class. The main reasons were:

    (a) talking with a student about a personal matter;
    (b) explaining a difficult grammar point;
    (c) dealing with a serious discipline problem.

Similar purposes have been found in other studies: the teachers of French in Macaro's (1997) study in the UK liked to use the L1 for relationship building, explaining difficult grammar, and disciplining; Mitchell (1988) and Liu et al. (2004) found that explaining difficult grammar and meanings were the two most common reasons.

These purposes cover three key dimensions of pedagogical communication: establishing positive relationships, ensuring understanding, and maintaining discipline. It is therefore not surprising if teachers want to ensure understanding by using the students' L1 to carry them out. On the other hand, these same key purposes have potential to provide a compelling context for L2 use which is motivated by immediate communicative needs (a feature which the L2 classroom is

often said to lack). If some teachers exploit this potential but others do not, often in spite of the sense of guilt mentioned earlier, why is this so?

The factor mentioned most frequently to explain the extensive use of L1 (e.g. in the studies of Mitchell (1988), Macaro (1997), and Liu et al. (2004)) is the students' low language proficiency. Many studies also mention the *teachers'* inadequate proficiency. Many studies mention contextual factors such as pressure of exams or class size. More positively, some also mention the psychological reassurance that the L1 can provide, especially for less proficient students, in what may seem a disorienting foreign language environment (e.g. Meiring & Norman, 2002).

An extensive survey of how and why ELT teachers use the L1 in a wide range of contexts over the world can be found in Hall and Cook (2013).

Why Do L2 Students Use Their L1?

Not only from teachers' perspective, a great number of studies have also investigated translingual practice from the *learners'* perspectives. After analysing 35 Chinese primary students' practice of translanguaging, Guo (2022) suggests that these students' translanguaging is used for two purposes: 1) to accomplish learning tasks, including comprehending new materials and producing sentences in English; and 2) to express themselves, such as describing what they can do or making comments about something. For these young language learners, translanguaging serves as an important way of understanding and expressing themselves

In a recent study, Zhang and Hadjioannou (2022) adopted a qualitative case study approach to analyse the translanguaging practice of Chinese learners with regard to their English academic reading and found that translanguaging was widely used in their writing processes. They used their L1 (Chinese) to facilitate thinking and drafting, searched for L1 (Chinese) resources to help them understand abstract concepts, and used effective Chinese writing strategies or tools to guide their English writing.

Ryosuke (2022) explored 190 Japanese learners' use of translanguaging in the communicative English classroom. The findings show that almost all the participants, to varying degrees, utilized Japanese when performing communicative tasks in English. Ryosuke identified five major speech functions of students' use of their L1, namely (a) fillers, (b) backchannelling, (c) asking for help, (d) equivalents, and (f) metalanguage.

Towards a Principled Approach to Using the L1

What is needed is clearly not an attempt to ban the L1 completely and not a situation where use of the L1 might become dominant. It is well established in both theory and practice that L2 learning requires both exposure to essential input and extensive opportunities to communicate with the language. What we need, then, is a principled approach to L1 use which seeks to balance both the L1's potential to support learning and the dangers presented by its excessive use.

Here I will outline one possible approach by adopting the framework used by Kim and Elder (2005). Kim and Elder distinguish between two main categories of goals in language lessons:

(a) 'core goals': these are goals which are related directly to learning the L2 (e.g. explaining, checking understanding, organizing practice);

(b) 'framework goals': these are more focused on creating a context which facilitates this learning (e.g. establishing relationships, classroom management, giving instructions).

Kerr (2019) uses the terms 'core functions' and 'social functions' of the L1 to refer to the same distinction. Whichever pair of terms one uses, in actual classroom use the distinction is blurred and the two kinds of goal (of function) often overlap. For example, a discussion activity may be organised so that it not only maximizes the amount of L2 use (core goal) but also fosters collaborative relationships between all classroom participants (framework/social goal).

Using the L1 to Achieve Core Goals

Many valuable teaching techniques exploit the L1as a stimulus for learning. For example:

At the presentation stage, the L1 can enable students to progress more quickly to the stages of internalization and active use. The most obvious example is providing L1 equivalents for L2 vocabulary items. Another is the 'sandwich technique' for introducing dialogues by presenting each new utterance in the sequence L1 – L2 – L1 (Butzkamm, 2003).

At the practice stage, L1 utterances can provide effective stimuli to elicit L2 equivalents. In the 'bilingual method' (e.g. Dodson, 1972; Butzkamm, 2003), equivalence should lie not at the word level but at the level of meaning: meanings are implanted into the learner's mind and re-expressed through the L2. As in other kinds of translation, the L1 'makes demands on the learner's meaning system' and creates a need to expand his or her language repertoire (Munro, 1999, p. 7).

At the production stage, L1 situations can serve as input or stimuli for L2 use. For example, students may interview friends or family in the L1 and produce written portraits for a TL readership; brainstorm ideas for a story in the security of the L1 and later write it in the L2; or write about their own lives first in the L1 and then in the TL. Such activities serve as a natural bridge between the L1 and the L2, as well as a source of security and ownership over learning.

Further ideas on how the L1 (including translation activities) can be used constructively at different stages of learning can be found in Duff (1989), Atkinson (1993), Deller and Rinvolucri (2002), Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009), Cook (2010) and Kerr (2014, 2019).

Using the L1 to Achieve Framework Goals

Reference has already been made to the psychological support that the L1 can provide. This aspect is highlighted especially in 'majority-language' learning contexts such as ESL in Australia (Wigglesworth, 2002) or the USA (e.g. Auerbach, 1993) but is also relevant to other contexts.

In choosing between the L1 and L2 for purposes such as discussing personal problems or maintaining discipline, there are conflicting criteria. From a psychological perspective, there will be many situations where the L1 seems advisable. But these same situations also offer precisely the stimuli for real communication that the classroom often lacks. The choice must depend on the nature of the specific situation, topic and learner(s), including the latter's proficiency and the extent to which they feel 'at home' with the language.

These considerations apply also to the use of the L1 for routine classroom management. Using it for complex management issues may become overwhelming and seem time-consuming, especially at early stages and with less proficient learners. On the other hand, many teachers recognize that this is a domain in which the L2 has real communicative value and should be used as soon and as often as possible.

Strategic and Compensatory Use of the L1

With respect to both core goals and framework goals, a distinction is sometimes made (e.g. by Cameron, 2001) between 'strategic' and 'compensatory' use of the L1. Strategic use refers to using the L1 to facilitate learning in deliberate ways. Compensatory use refers to unplanned use of the L1 to deal with an unexpected problem. The distinction is mainly a matter of whether the teacher has actually planned to use the L1 or uses it in an ad hoc way, and we may expect that with increasing experience, awareness and planning, the proportion of strategic use will also increase.

Conclusion

It has been said that in the foreign language classroom, the L1 can be either 'the single biggest danger' (Atkinson, 1993, p. 13), if it threatens the primacy of the L2, or 'the most important ally' (Butzkamm, 2003, p. 30), if it is used in principled ways. In Butzkamm's words, pp. 32-33, the L1 'launches, as it were, the pupils' canoes into the foreign-language current', but the goal remains to establish the L2 as the main means of classroom communication. Kerr (2019, p. 17) sums up the situation: 'English-mainly is generally a better rule of thumb than English-only, but, clearly, blanket acceptance of L1 use in English classrooms is no better than blanket banning.'.

This is one of many domains in which teachers need to 'find their own bearings', but in principled ways, in the 'postmethod' world of language learning and teaching (Littlewood & Wang, 2022).

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