

IS IT SUITABLE TO USE L1 IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

ความเหมาะสมของการใช้ภาษาที่หนึ่งในการเรียนการสอนภาษาต่างประเทศ

Mett Robrue

The Office of General Education, Panyapiwat Institute of Management

Abstract

The use of L1 in a foreign language classroom is both supported and argued by many scholars. The question whether or not to use the L1 in the foreign language (L2) classroom comes from two different theoretical frameworks, namely the interactionist framework and the sociocultural framework. This article shows presents the reasons why some people support the use of the L1 while other people against it based on the two frameworks. Furthermore, the article suggests different approaches on how to use the L1 and the FL to enhance students' acquisition to use foreign language more effectively.

Keywords: L1 usage, L2, Foreign language, Language acquisition

บทคัดย่อ

การใช้ภาษาที่ 1 ในชั้นเรียนภาษาต่างประเทศมีทั้งผู้สนับสนุนและผู้ไม่เห็นด้วย ปัญหานี้มีที่มาจากกรอบแนวคิดทฤษฎีที่ต่างกัน 2 กรอบคือ แนวคิดปฏิสัมพันธ์นิยมและแนวคิดสังคมวัฒนธรรม บทความนี้นำเสนอเหตุผลว่าทำไมคนบางกลุ่มสนับสนุนการใช้ภาษาที่ 1 ในชั้นเรียนภาษาต่างประเทศและทำไมคนบางกลุ่มจึงคัดค้านโดยอ้างอิงจากกรอบแนวคิดทั้ง 2 กรอบ นอกจากนี้บทความมีการเสนอแนะแนวทางในการเรียนการสอนโดยใช้ภาษาที่ 1 ร่วมกับภาษาต่างประเทศเพื่อให้ผู้เรียนมีความสามารถทางภาษามากยิ่งขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: การใช้ภาษาที่ 1 ภาษาที่ 2 ภาษาต่างประเทศ การเรียนรู้ภาษา

Introduction

It is always a dilemma for foreign language teachers (in this case is English language) especially non-native teachers whether or not to use native language (L1) in foreign language classrooms (FL). Take the education institute I work for as an example, here the director demands English to be the only language used in English classroom. Teachers are not expected to use L1 in the language classroom both in terms of communicating with the students and teaching. Is using only English (L2) in the FL classroom the best way to foster students' L2 proficiency? However, there are many researches on this topic propose that students can benefit from using their native language as a tool to foster target language rather than being detrimental (Bruhlmann, 2012: 1-10).

In this article I will describe the arguments of using L1 in FL classrooms within the context of the interactionist framework which is against the use of the L1 in the FL classrooms. After that I will talk about the socioculture framework which supports the use of the L1 in the FL classrooms. Finally, in the discussion section I will synthesize the above arguments and conclude with suggestions for further research.

Before going into the argument on the L1 use in the FL classroom, we must understand why the L1 is sometimes believed to have a role in the FL classroom and sometimes not. There are different pedagogical methods that have influenced how ESL/EFL instruction has changed over time. Through the years these methods come and go and now EFL/ESL teaching

is stuck with a dilemma – which teaching method should be used. Such dilemma occurs because these methods have differing views on the use of the L1.

Now I would like to talk about two pedagogical methods that have an important role in ESL/EFL instruction, namely Grammar Translation method (GT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The GT method was used in classrooms in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Vasatova, 2009: 14). The main purpose of using this method is to learn the target language through literature and translation. Students who use the GT method will learn a foreign language through a careful study of its grammatical rules and develop the capability to translate words and sentences from one language to another.

The disadvantages of this method are little emphasis on communication in the L2 because the goals are accuracy in grammar, reading and translation. Students who learn with this method will have low creativity and are lack of interaction between the students and the teacher. At last, the lack of communication in the L2 made the GT method to lose its popularity. Later theorists turn to other language teaching methods that are more into communicative and interactive approaches like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The CLT method was developed by Robert Langs in the early 1970s (Vasatova, 2009: 16). It is viewed as the most popular and recommendable approach (Widdowson, 1990: 160). One theorist who embraces CLT method to language teaching is Stephen Krashen. His

theory, Input Hypothesis, he assumes that students learn another language best when they are exposed to what he called “Comprehensible input” in the target language. It means the more FL in put the students have the more accomplish in the FL the students are. On the contrary, if students use less L2, the more difficult L2 acquisition will be. The CLT is on the opposite end of the GT that strongly avoids the use of the L1 in the FL learning. The goal of this approach is the students have meaningful interactions in the L2 where they use the L2 to negotiate meaning in order to understand what is being said in a real situation (Savignon, 1987: 235-242). The students learn to produce the FL by speaking. They copy the language, tones, voices, as if it is actually used in real world situations. The CLT has a tremendous influence on foreign language teaching today and this is why using the L1 in the FL classroom seems out of place.

The use of the L1 in the FL classroom is also affected by differing theories of second language acquisition. There are arguments for and against using the L1 in the classroom that can be viewed in 2 ways, namely interactionism and socioculturalism (Ellis, 2008: 467-474). Ellis points out that in the views of those who supports sociocultural framework the L1 can work as a scaffolder to support the students for FL learning. His view is also supported by Anton & DiCamilla (1998: 9-32) that the use of the L1 in the classroom helps the students interact with each other, understand the objective of a task, which help them to complete the

task. It is in the students’ instinct to use the L1 to help them learn a language, negotiate the meaning of a word and translate a sentence.

If someone uses the interactionist framework as an approach to learn a FL, it means that they need to be fully exposed to the FL as languages are best learned when the students use them to negotiate meaning and try to understand what they hear (Ellis, 2008: 467-474). However, if a person supports the sociocultural framework, his/her viewpoint about learning a FL will against those who follow the other frameworks such as the two frameworks that have opposite view on learning a language. It is difficult to point out which framework works best for learning a language. In the following section I will discuss about the interactionist framework and the reasons why those who favor it try to prevent the L1 in the FL classroom. After that I will discuss about the sociocultural framework and the reasons for using the L1 in the FL classroom.

The Interactionist Framework

In her research, Cook (2001: 402-423) points out that to maximize the use of L2 foreign language learners must be omitted from using the L1 in the FL classroom especially those who live in a country where people mostly speak L1. It is obvious that if students want to learn a language effectively they need to encounter the language as much as possible and the teacher can help them by using only the FL in the classroom. Teachers play an important role to convince students to learn

a FL. If the teachers want their students to use the FL in class they must first be an example by showing them in greeting, giving instruction, commenting or describing a task. Convincing the students is very important, if they believe they can use a FL then using it in the classroom is not difficult. Showing the students the benefits of using the FL and managing the classroom in the way the students focus on the FL use will also ensure the place for the FL in the classroom. In their research, Polio & Duff (1994: 159-161) mention that if teachers use less FL in classroom students are likely not using it as well. In the research they observed a group of L2 university teachers on how much they use L1 in classroom. The teachers in this research reasoned that they use the L1 to help explain grammatical concepts that did not exist in the L1, difficult words or announce important matters like tests. However, these reasons are likely to saving time as it is easier to explain in the native language of the students. Another reason that the teachers used the L1 in the classroom was to build relationship with the students. They mentioned that using the L1 in the classroom made the students felt comfortable. On the contrary, Polio & Duff (1994: 313-326) concludes on this point that making the students feel at ease with learning is important but it does not mean that the teachers should take away valuable time for using the FL in the classroom. The students should have an opportunity to use as much FL as they can and also the students are not expected to understand what the teachers say in the FL 100%. The point of

learning a FL is the students learn to develop their understanding on their own, figure it out by themselves.

One problem that is found when using the L1 in the classroom as a way to help the teachers and the students communicate easier is that the students might not see the FL important to them to communicate ideas (Polio & Duff, 1994: 313-326). If the L1 is used inconsistently and unsystematically it will turn out to be a disaster. Using the L1 is possible but it must be used with a good reason. There is one argument against the use of the L1 in the classroom done by Macaro (2001: 531-548). In his research he investigated how six student teachers who taught French in a school in England. Macaro wanted to know why the student teachers used the L1 (in this case is English) with their students. The result revealed that the average amount of the time the student teachers used the L1 was 6.9% (Macaro, 2001: 538) and the reason to use the L1 was to give explanation of difficult words, keep control of the students, or reprimand them. However, what the student teachers could not explain was why they used the L1. Code-switching from L1 to L2 and vice versa can happen in classroom but then again it must be used with discipline and has a reason to use it.

If some teachers cannot give a reason why they use L1 deliberately in classroom then what would happen if students communicate with L1 while they are doing an activity that is supposed to be carried out in L2? As observed by Hellermann & Pekarek Doehler (2010: 31-40)

in their study that was done on a group of native speakers of Swiss-German who were around 13-14 years old. These students had studied in Lower-intermediate French language classroom. In the study a group of 3 male students were given a task in their French class to give directions to someone by using a map. During the task they were mostly used their native language, however, they did not make good use of it. One student was distant himself from the others and started drawing something in his paper while his friends were practicing the imaginary conversation. When he joined in the conversation with his friends he jokingly mimicked his friend's dialogue, made jokes and tried to distract his friend in German. Later his friends were distracted from the task and could not complete the dialogue. This instance goes to show that an unprincipled usage of L1 in classroom is obviously not beneficial for anyone. However, if both the students and the teacher need to use L1 in classroom, how can they make it happen? In the next section, we will examine the use of L1 mentioned in some researches which are beneficial to L2 learning.

The Sociocultural Framework

When talking about second language learning, the arguments can be divided into 2 groups—those who against the use of the L1 in the classroom and those who favor it. The arguments against the L1 use mostly derive from the interactionist framework, however, the socio-cultural framework favors the use of the L1. When talking about the latter framework one

must refers to the concept of language learning of the same name developed by Lev Vygotsky. In his book *Thinking and Speech* (1987: 39-285) he supported the use of L1 in second language learning. Vygotsky noted that the learning of an L2 must be incorporated with the L1 because the background of one's knowledge can be found in one's L1 and Learning an L2 essentially depends on the development of the L1. That means when learning a new word in a foreign language, one learns conceptually first by referring to the meaning of that word in one's L1 then comprehends the actual name of the word in an L2 (Eun & Lim, 2009: 18). Using the L1 in the FL classroom is favored by many researchers (Bruhlmann, 2012: 66) because the L1 is a part of the students. When the students learn the FL they inevitably think in their native language. It is natural process of learning a language (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998: 234-235). The L1 is an essential part of the students and the teachers should not prevent them from using it. Therefore, we should bring out the benefits of the L1 to help the students learn the FL effectively.

In a monolingual classroom that uses only the FL sometimes the students will find it uncomfortable especially the weak students, as they feel they need to struggle to learn the language and when they do not understand they are afraid to ask the teacher for help or clarification. The use of L1 can bridge the gap between the teacher and the students. The students will have more confidence and feel at ease to learn.

In her research, Edstrom (2006: 275-292) reflected her own use of the L1 (English) in a Spanish classroom by videotaping herself while teaching. Her Spanish class consisted of 18-22 basic Spanish students. She revealed that sometimes she used the L1 with her students even if they understood the sentence she said earlier in Spanish. She reasoned her use of the L1 that she wanted to make a connection with the students. She also admitted that more often than not the FL (Spanish) was a topic rather than a means of communication and learning a language was not only to be able to communicate in that language but when there was a topic about Spanish culture or the history of Mexico, the language that could convey these topics the best was the L1 (Edstrom, 2006: 283-287).

Concerning the students' confidence in learning the FL, Cook (2001: 402-423) also views it the same way as Edstrom. She reasons that when students speak in FL, they do not feel it the same way as they speak in their native language. They feel less confident, however, the use of the L1 can help them feel better because it connects with their personality and identity. We should view the L1 as a useful tool in creating authentic FL uses rather than abandon it at all costs (Cook, 1999: 185). Moreover, students naturally use the L1 as part of their FL learning process. As observed by Bawcom (2002, cited in Vaezi & Mirzaei, 2007: 4) in her study on the use of the L1 by learners in the classroom, it was found that 36% of the learners used their native language for affective

factors such as sense of identity, social interaction, and security. In addition, 41% of the learners used it as part of their learning processes such as checking comprehension, doing assignments and 18% of the learners used the L1 for translating objectives and to understand vocabulary. Cook (1992: 557-591) voiced that when learners learn a FL they do not shut off their L1 completely while process the FL, instead the L1 is constantly available.

As opposed to those who believe using the L1 in the L2 classroom will disrupt the students' language learning process. If one wants to maximize the FL use it does not mean that it is inappropriate for the teacher to use the L1 (Turnbull, 2001: 531-538). A good example of how to use the L1 is to use code-switching to describe difficult words or phrases. Macaro (2005: 63-84) pointed out that not using code-switching when talking about a difficult phrase can turn out to be a disaster. If teachers introduce a phrase like "raised in the gutter" and paraphrase it in the FL with simplified words (brought up badly by poor parents), students, especially the slow learners will lose a chance to learn the original phrase. They might understand the meaning but they do not learn the new aspect of the FL.

Code-switching can be a benefit for both advanced students and lower level students. Take Liebscher & O'Cain (2005: 234-247) for example, their research is a study of using code-switching in an advanced German at University of Alberta. The teacher and the 12 female students who were part of this research

used English as their L1. The researchers mentioned that code-switching was a natural conversational tool the teacher and the students used besides the use of volume, speed and intonation, pitch changing to communicate their ideas and opinions. The teacher and the students both firmly agreed that using the L1 was very useful for them. One thing that should be noted about the success of the code-switching method in this research is that the teacher adamantly specified when to use the L1 and when not to. It means that if there is a guideline for the L1 use then code-switching method can be effective in the FL classroom. As for lower level students the use of the L1 is useful because the students can understand assignments and lectures the teacher gives them (Cook, 2001: 402-423). Anton & DiCamilla (1998: 9-32) agree that lower level students are those who would see that the use of the L1 in the FL classroom is useful as they use the L1 as a way to process the FL that is given in the classroom and they primarily use the L1 to develop relationship with their friends and teachers. Students with low level of FL proficiency always feel anxiety in FL classrooms than high level students. The use of the L1 can mitigate this anxiety (Krashen, 1982: 6-10). Besides reducing anxiety in FL classrooms, the use of the L1 also helps lower level students to be more engage in the exercise the teacher assigns them to do.

In their research, Anton & DiCamilla (1998: 9-32) observed 5 English native adult students

in a writing assignment. These students studied basic Spanish as a foreign language class. They were assigned to work in pairs and their actions were recorded. It was found that the L1 played an important role in their learning as the students used it to help them understand the assignment, organize the task, look up the vocabulary, understand grammatical structures that were needed for the assignment. Without the L1 the students would not complete the task effectively. This result shows that if the students use the L1 in the classroom they can have productive learning, they know what to do in a task and can find a solution to the problem. This result is contrast with those who support the interactionist framework. They claim that not understanding everything in a language class is a natural part of language learning (Bruhlmann, 2012: 70). It is important for students to understand what they learn if not they would feel uncomfortable and the affective filter will occur, which means that language acquisition will not happen (Krashen, 1982: 30-44)

In conclusion, one can see the use of the L1 as an approach to help the students feel more comfortable, less pressure and lower the affective filter. With the use of the L1 it creates language acquisition which is mentioned in Krashen's study (1982: 30-44) that the lower the affective filter the students feel the more FL acquisition they gain. If the students feel at ease with what they are learning, they can learn better.

Discussion

There is no end to the argument of using or not using the L1 in the FL classroom as each of them has its own strengths. Some people who do not support the use of the L1 reason that using the L1 may lead to uncontrollable classroom as some students who feel at ease at using it will communicate less in the FL once they have a chance to use their native language. At the same time, when using both the L1 and the FL in a language classroom students may not have a chance to use the FL as much as they can because some parts of the activities in the classroom are interrupted by the use of the L1. It means that the students have few opportunities to negotiate meaning in the FL. The use of the L1 also seems ambiguous and meaningless if teachers use it when they want to. That means the teachers use the L1 to explain an activity or situation that can be explained with the FL because they think using the L1 save a lot of time than using the FL. Contrary to those who support the use of the L1 in the FL classroom, they favor the L1 because it helps the students to understand the FL better. It also lowers the affective filter and helps the students to complete a task effectively.

All of these arguments have their origin from two frameworks, namely interactionism and socioculturalism. When one adheres one's belief to a framework, it surely conflicts with other people who believe in another framework. Many researcher, teachers and directors have

different views about using the L1 in the FL classroom and these differences come from the positive things and negative things they hear and experience about the use of the L1 (Bruhlmann, 2012: 72-74). What they can do is embracing only one framework to be used in their classrooms. If they prefer the interactionist framework, then they should exclusively use the FL. If they prefer the sociocultural framework, then the L1 and the FL should be used together.

However, Edstrom (2006: 275-292) once mentioned that no two classrooms are the same, and different students have different styles of learning and understanding about what they learn. With this notion, it is up to the teachers and the school to decide the suitable method to use the L1 in the FL classroom. The teachers may at first use only the FL but use simplified language, slow down the speech and speak in shorter sentences so that the students have time to catch up and comprehend. At the same time, the teachers can use the L1 in the part that they think is more comprehensible if it is explained in the L1 such as explaining the objective of a task or explaining criteria. These parts are important and should not be explained in the FL alone, with the L1 the students can understand better.

These are examples of how to use the L1 in the FL classroom in a meaningful and well-reasoned approach. At the same time, when using the L1 it must be used with caution and should be used when it is really needed.

Conclusion

No matter how much the teachers use the FL in a language classroom and how many times they want their students to communicate in the FL only, they should know that the L1 is always there. It is a part of the students that cannot be separated. When the students are trying to comprehend the FL, they think in the L1 and make connections with the L1 because the native language is an inseparable part of them and to omit the use of the L1 can slow their FL acquisition and increase the affective filter (Cook, 2001: 402-423). Instead of omitting the use of the L1, it can be used as an approach to facilitate and enhance the FL comprehension. As learning the FL in the classroom is artificial situation and in real world the students normally use the L1 to help them understand the FL. The teachers should see it beneficial rather than shun it. Therefore, it is better to guide them how to use their L1 effectively to enhance

their FL acquisition. But how often and how much does a teacher need to use the L1 in a FL classroom? This answer is still obscure as there are no guidelines to show the teachers and the students. My suggestion is there should be a research studying how often and in what way the L1 can be used in the FL classroom. Saying that whether it should be used “properly” or “with discipline” does not clarify the question. Another area for a future research is about the use of translation as a means to help the students understand the FL. This is by no means about grammar translation but it is to investigate the use of translation by the students to help them understand the differences between the L1 grammar structure and the FL grammar structure. Once we have a concrete guideline and how to use translation to facilitate the students’ comprehension of the FL then the advocates of the L1 and the FL can call a truce.

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Name and Surname: Mett Robrue

Highest Education: M.A. (Translation), Mahidol University

University or Agency: Panyapiwat Institute of Management

Field of Expertise: Translation, Interpretation, Language Teaching

Address: 85/1 Moo 2, Chaengwattana Rd., Bang Talad, Pakkred, Nonthaburi 11120