

Judiciousness of mother tongue use in EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

The use of mother tongue in EFL teaching process is an inevitable component if both the teacher and the student have the same mother tongue (L1) and when both English and L1 are the medium of instruction. Different teaching methods had different attitudes towards mother tongue use in EFL classroom from strict prohibition to its extensive use. There is not even the unanimity among EFL teachers about this issue nowadays. It is a common perception that the foreign language (L2) acquisition is strongly influenced by the student's first language. That's because, 'foreign' accents appear in the L2 speech of students. Although, the importance of mother tongue along with foreign language developing is now widely accepted among researchers, there is the danger of L1 overuse and therefore L2 underuse in EFL classroom. The article provides some reasons for the L1 use in the EFL classroom and makes some suggestions about the ties between the L1 and the L2 while teaching / learning a foreign language. There are several reasons why learners actually use the L1 when they should be using the L2. So, it was necessary to introduce the concept of judicious use of mother tongue in EFL classroom recommended in educational situations listed in the article.

Keywords

foreign language acquisition; foreign language underuse/overuse; (inter)cultural skills; language learning process; learner/teacher interaction

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Introduction

Although it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the concepts of first language, native language, primary language, and mother tongue, the following explanation for the mother tongue will be adopted later in the article. A mother tongue is the first language (L1) that a child learns automatically and naturally before any other language. He/she acquires it from the speakers and social environment around him/her. Usually, the first language is learnt at home from birth during childhood.

The use of L1 in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching process is an inevitable component if both the teacher and the student have the same L1 and when both English and mother tongue are the medium of instruction.

Different teaching methods had varied, and often opposite, attitudes towards mother tongue use in EFL classroom from outright prohibition to its free use during the classes.

So, on the one hand its use was strictly prohibited while such teaching methods as Direct Method and Audio-lingual Method were used; on the other hand it was used extensively during Grammar-Translation Method. Although preserved by many teachers, the "English-only" classroom policy, which encourages students to use L2 as the only means of interaction with teachers and peers, seems to lose its grounds. Since then, there have been fundamental researches in psychology, teaching / learning, linguistics and other language related educational fields which have a significant impact on the strategies employed in the EFL classroom to maximize the outcomes.

Because of the lack of unanimity among EFL teachers as for the use of L1 in EFL teaching process nowadays, the issue remains highly disputed. The EFL teacher and the students cannot avoid the mother tongue while teaching and learning. Therefore, the need to research and set some precise benchmarks on this regard becomes a high priority for EFL teachers.

Research question and objectives

The main question of this research is as follows:

What are the learning situations when mother tongue use is recommended in EFL learning / teaching process?

This paper also aims a) to provide an insight on how different approaches treated the amount of mother tongue use in EFL classroom and also b) to give and examine the reasons for the mother tongue use in the EFL classroom.

However, the main objective of the research is to provide practical recommendations followed by a reasoned list of learning situations when mother tongue use is recommended, so that EFL teachers could rely on it in their classroom activities.

Use of L1 in EFL teaching process

3.1. Ratio of L1 and L2 use in the EFL classroom

There is not the unanimity among EFL teachers about total L1 removal from the language classroom. So much the more if we take into account that on a global scale, most English language teachers are non-native (Harbord 1992: 350) and the complete ban of the students' mother tongue in the language classroom is often viewed sceptically. Garcia and Sylvan (2011) consider outdated the monolingual education in the 'globalized' world we live nowadays and the practice of imposing only one language is discouraged. Anton and Dicamilla (1999, p. 245) state that the use of L1 is beneficial for the language learning process since "it acts as a critical psychological tool that enables learners to construct effective collaborative dialogue in the completion of meaning-based language tasks".

From this perspective, we may distinguish two basic approaches the monolingual approach and bilingual approach.

The advocate of the monolingual approach, Krashen has claimed that learners acquire foreign languages following

chiefly the same path they acquire their mother tongue. It means that, the use of the mother tongue in the teaching / learning process should be minimized (1981). Such a viewpoint makes teachers to discourage L1 use in EFL classes. Depending on the foreign language learned, L1 may be sometimes misleading. In spite of the universals existing in language systems, there are more or less differences in languages too. L1 interference in teaching / learning process may cause errors due to the L1 transfer. These errors range from phonetics and vocabulary to grammar.

In situations where the students are not allowed to speak their L1 in EFL classroom and even are punished for its use, students are afraid of speaking their L1, and use it “quietly so they were not overheard or by writing notes in languages other than English” feeling ashamed when punished for using their own language. (Goldstein, 2003) Learning another language should not undervalue their own language, but on the contrary should add richness to students’ lives, and a positive experience because L1 represents an access to valuable resources.

Although, L1 has long been considered as a source of errors, many teachers have criticized the monolingual approach. They have considered the L1 use in EFL classes more beneficial than harmful at different levels. Vivian Cook (2001) argues that the mother tongue in EFL classes was “a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over a hundred years.” The learners come to EFL classes “loaded” with their mother tongue and a cultural heritage that nobody must deny or underestimate. The ban of the mother tongue in classes where learners are at lower levels of English proficiency is practically impossible. That is why EFL teachers should consider L1 not a source of errors but a tool and a powerful resource used in a number of ways to maximize foreign language learning.

Macaro (2009) provides three different positions towards L1/L2 use at EFL lessons: virtual, maximal, and optimal. The “virtual position” practitioners reject the use of L1 imitating a pure L2 environment; on the opposite side the “maximal position” advocates using L2 as much as possible so that teachers who have to resort to this approach found it “unfortunate and regrettable”. Both virtual and maximal positions consider L2 as the ultimate goal and disregard the value of L1 in EFL learning/teaching process. On the other hand, “Optimal position” practitioners consider L1 as a cognitive valuable tool which can improve L2 learning. Though, they criticize the overuse of the L1, the use of the latter “at certain moments during the teaching and learning process might actually enhance learning more than by sticking to L2” (Macaro, 2009, p. 36). McKay (2002, 116) considers that, “there is no one best method and no one method that is best for a particular context”. That means teacher should choose the best position to use with a particular group of students.

The importance of L1 along with L2 developing is now widely accepted among researchers. There is the danger of L1 overuse and therefore L2 underuse in EFL classroom which may lead to the substantial decrease of opportunity to practice the latter, which is less desired outcome. Nevertheless, the judicious use of mother tongue in EFL classroom may contribute to language learning-teaching process in certain circumstances occasions. From this perspective, the teacher’s decision of how much time of L1

and L2 should be in their classes seems to influence the students’ performance efficiency in acquiring L2. Figure 1 provides some suggestions about the ties between the L1 and the L2 in EFL classroom.

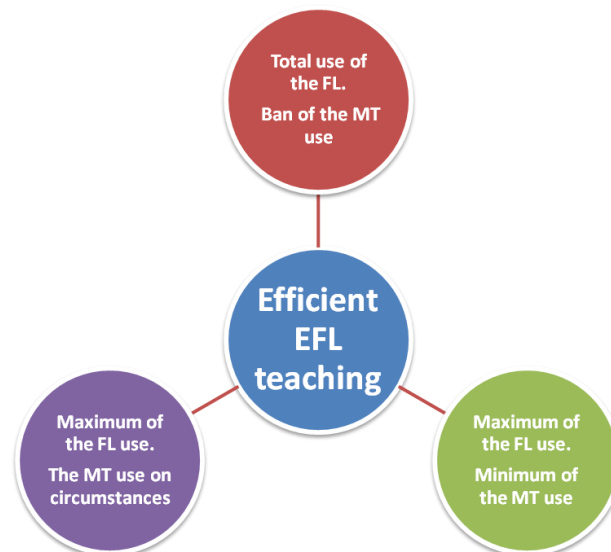


Figure 1: Some suggestions about the ties between the L1 and the L2 in EFL classroom.

There are still debates about L1 using in EFL teaching. It is important to note that there are no criteria regarding the right amount of the use of L1. At the same time, teacher’s use of the mother tongue cannot present a threat to foreign language acquisition because students already have a language basis from their mother tongue. (Cook, 2002). The mother tongue should be used very judiciously in EFL classroom, and this judiciousness is balanced by the English teacher who should consider the students’ level of learning. Usually, the lower level of English is, the more use of the L1 in class is made by teachers. Or, the second language in EFL classroom should be used as much as possible; however the mother tongue has an important role for balance at the second language course.

We can convey the meaning of an unknown word in many ways, such as a definition in the second language, a demonstration, visuals, realia, L2 context clues, or an L1 translation. (Nation) We should never lose sight that the comparative analysis between the mother tongue and the foreign language is important and that the aim of foreign language isn’t to substitute the L1. Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that “the purpose of using the native language is to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar”.

3.2. Reasons for the L1 use in the EFL classroom

Many EFL teachers still strongly believe that a single word from the learners’ mother tongue shouldn’t be used in the classroom. Such teachers are exponents of the so-called ‘Monolingual Approach’; other ones who use L1 wisely in their EFL classrooms follow the ‘Bilingual approach’. A third approach, introduced by Nation (Nation), is called a ‘Balanced Approach’. He believes that teachers need to show respect for learners’ L1 and thus avoid doing actions which make English seem superior to L1.

There seems to have been a recent swing towards a more flexible L1 use according to which the more foreign

language is used in the classroom, the better EFL teaching / learning process is. L1 remains an important instrument for the child's intellectual, physical and moral development during educational process.

If in the classroom, all learners share the same L1, teacher should use a range of options to encourage learners to use the L2 as much as possible. There are several reasons why learners actually use the L1 when they should be using the L2. The most evident ones are: low proficiency in the L2, the naturalness of using the L2 while doing certain tasks, shyness in using the L2, or simply a lack of interest in learning the L2. (Nation)

L1 use in EFL classroom can have core functions which are concerned with the EFL teaching process and social functions concerned with the management of the classroom. The former includes such teaching techniques like explaining grammar and vocabulary, or checking of grammar, vocabulary and text understanding. The latter includes maintaining discipline, giving instructions, dealing with administrative matters.

It is a common perception that the L2 acquisition is strongly influenced by the student's first language. That's because, 'foreign' accents appear in the L2 speech of students. When a Romanian speaks English, his/her English sounds Romanian. The learner's L1 affects the L2 vocabulary and grammar, too. Or, the L1 interferes with L2, so that features of the L1 are transferred into the L2 (Ellis, 1985). Teachers are often unsure about the use of students' L1 in the classroom; it is either encouraged or forbidden. Anyway teachers should not feel guilty while using L1 in cases when it is really necessary and appropriate. Grim's (2010, p. 207) research shows that teachers switch to L1 to "facilitate comprehension, overcome grammatical obstacles and save time in lengthy L2 task explanations". In fact, the students' mother tongue is the greatest advantage brought to the English language classroom.

3.3. Judicious use of mother tongue in EFL classroom

The problem of judicious use of L1 in EFL learning / teaching process is when and how to use it. It should be born in mind that the target language must be used wherever / whenever possible and L1 where / when necessary. As stated above, the reasonable use of L1 can play its unavoidable role in some cases, at the same time L2 should remain the most operational language of EFL learning / teaching process.

So, the mother tongue use in EFL classroom maybe recommended in the following situations:

1. Giving instructions: While doing the tasks in group, in pairs, at project, or even alone, the students must know clearly the details of what they have to do. So that the students to do the tasks correctly without any confusion. The goal of the lesson is explained by the teacher in L1. Instructions may be repeated simultaneously in both (L1 and L2) languages, so that the teacher is sure the students have understood. Also, teachers may use the students' L1 to summarize the material at the end of the lesson in order to provide a summary of progress, a kind of "framework design", for example: "So, let's sum up. At this lesson we have learned the Present Simple Tense, and told about its functions".

2. Explaining abstract terms: The meaning of abstract nouns like *integrity* is very difficult to teach as it is rather vague even in L1. The use of L1 helps the students to escape the difficulties of incomprehension or misunderstanding.

Proverbs in the target language should be taught with the corresponding ones in the mother tongue if they exist. Otherwise a translation / explanation of the proverbs in L1 should be given. The same thing happens with idiomatic expressions which may have corresponding idioms or not. This might be very helpful to detect (inter)cultural differences or similarities.

3. Teaching grammar. A comparison between L1 and L2 grammars will highlight the differences between the two languages. While teaching grammar, the explanations may judiciously be given in student's mother tongue to avoid negative transfer. The explanation in L1 is a very time-saving solution, at the same teacher is surer the taught material is understood.

4. Teaching the low level students. Usually, teachers use students' L1 when other explaining methods such as direct demonstration, synonyms-antonyms, word-building elements, interpretation of word meanings in L2 cannot be properly implemented. Thus, the use of mother tongue in EFL classrooms with low proficiency students becomes inevitable when all other teaching techniques fail to make them understand the taught item.

5. Translation tasks. There was an excess of translation asks when GTM was a common method in teaching English. Then, a sudden and immediate removal of L1 from the classroom followed. Nowadays, translation from the native language into the target language or vice versa is often used as classroom technique, or more often in written tasks. Thus translation competence remains an important one. Cook (2010) has noticed that translation is a major part of communicative bilingual competence. Therefore, its importance in a globalized and multilingual world has a great educational potential.

The traditional ways of translation (e.g. with a paper dictionary) still exist, but are replaced by machine translators. The accuracy of online translation has been improving considerably, so that many people have questioned whether language learning, and therefore EFL, will still be necessary in the future. Online translations become more and more accurate, depending on the languages that are being translated from and to, and the type of text. These days there are many electronic translators, such as Google Translate, or translation pens. All you have to do is use an app and glide the camera of a smartphone or tablet over text to get an instant translation or, even simpler, speak into the app and your translation appears.

6. Managing classroom conflicts. Management of conduct and discipline is often hard to be done in L2, especially, if a serious conflict that interferes with learning emerges in the classroom. Classroom conflicts don't happen only at the EFL lessons, but at other disciplines too. The difference consists in the fact that at science, math, geography, etc. courses, teacher / learners use the same mother tongue, whereas at EFL course there is both mother and target (foreign) language. The teacher can try to prevent the conflict in L2, but nevertheless L1 seems to be more efficient.

7. Discussing errors. Errors are indispensable to the learning process of foreign language. Unlike native speakers, who can identify and correct mistakes almost immediately, non-native speakers who learn L2 have an incomplete knowledge of the target language, and are not always able to correct the errors they make. While expressing their ideas, most of the learners chiefly rely on their mother tongue. This one plays a very significant role in English learning process and has great influence on L2. Such is known as interlingual transfer. Discussing errors caused by the interference of the learner's mother tongue should be done in L1.

The figure 2 shows the primary reasons that require judicious use of mother tongue in EFL classroom.

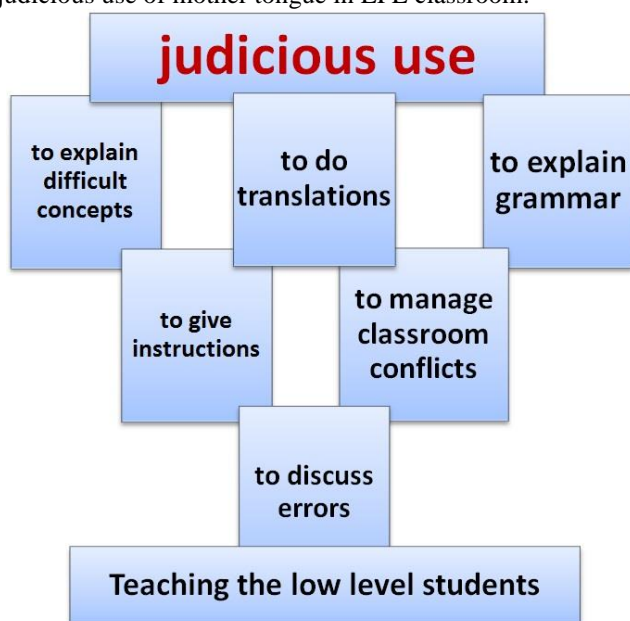


Figure 2: The reasons for judicious use of mother tongue.

L1 use is time-saving; therefore it allows avoiding long explanations in the target language. It is sometimes easier and more efficient to give a translation (or visual aids) of a word than start by trying to give the explanation. It does not necessarily mean that the latter will lead to the expected result.

A comparison of L1 and L2 is a very enriching experience, which can enhance the TL acquisition. This comparison can be done both at vocabulary and grammar level.

Language is also a vehicle for developing (inter)cultural skills. Cultural differences and similarities can be highlighted through various linguistic activities, like proverbs, idiomatic expressions, songs, and even jokes.

Using L1 minimize the stress the learners may have while studying L2. Acceptance of L1 use gives a sense of security nourished by the learners' identity.

There are also weaknesses of L1 use in EFL classrooms. The most significant one is the danger of L1 excessive use. According to Atkinson (1987, p. 426), overusing of L1 results in the following risks:

1. The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not "really" understood any item of language until it has been translated.
2. The teacher and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic

equivalence, and pragmatic features, thereby oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translations.

3. Students speak to the teacher in the mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean in L2.

4. Students fail to realise that during many activities in the classroom it is essential that they use only L2.

Overuse of L1 could produce an involuntary effect causing some difficulties for EFL learners to communicate orally in L2. In such a situation, 'there are virtually no studies which have demonstrated that switching to the first language as opposed to maintaining second-language discourse, in specific circumstances, actually leads to better learning whether in the short term or the long term' (Macaro, 2009, p. 39).

Discussion and conclusion

Use of L1 in EFL classroom has been a disputed issue over time. On the one hand, some teachers reject L1 use; hence don't recognize any significant potential in it. On the other hand, other teachers massively overuse it. Thus, when and how to use L1 and when to use L2 in EFL classroom is one of the hardest decisions the teacher should make. Overall, this study shows that to overcome this argument, L1 should be used in EFL classroom in balanced way.

Both, the EFL teacher and the students cannot avoid the mother tongue while teaching and learning. That means that while learning / teaching a foreign language, complete ban of L1 is not possible and even not justifiable. The use of mother tongue at EFL lessons can be useful in certain cases. Thus, a rational and judicious L1 use in EFL classes can only be advantageous.

Nowadays mother tongue and foreign languages are separate school subjects, which together contribute towards a more general educational goal: the development of global citizen. The relationship between mother tongue and foreign language learning and teaching is of great interest; respectively their use in the same classroom should be mutually beneficial developing ability to participate and communicate across cultures.

Of course, EFL teachers should use L2 most of the time. At the same time, they should not feel guilty while using L1 when it is appropriate or really necessary. This study has shown the necessity of using mother tongue in the following learning situations: when explaining L2 grammar, the teacher should compare it with L1's grammar and also use L1 in his/her explanations to be sure the learners have understood material; the progress of beginners will probably be quicker if the L1 use is allowed in the EFL classroom; translation exercises are also a very useful practice..

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