



# Using L1 in Teaching English to Advanced Students

Khalid Al Hariri

College of Islamic and Arabic Studies, 96749 Dubai, UAE

E-mail: [ibtaa@hotmail.com](mailto:ibtaa@hotmail.com)

Received: 20-04- 2015

Accepted: 25-07- 2015

Advance Access Published: August 2015

Published: 01-11- 2015

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.6p.220 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.6p.220>

## Abstract

Using L1 in the English classroom has long been considered as an unforgivable wrongdoing. Many English teachers who use L1 in the classroom feel guilty about it and in many cases do not admit it. Recent researchers started to question the validity of this claim suggesting contexts and situations in which using L1 can be very helpful in ELT and refuting, on the other hand, the claims upon which the idea of using L2 solely were built. My paper will examine the attitudes of advanced English language learners toward using L1 in the class of English where the students and the teacher speak the same first language and will also examine the attitudes of a group of EFL and ESL teachers toward the same practice. The same questionnaire given to the students will be redesigned and given to a number of teachers so that the study will look at the viewpoints from both perspectives.

**Keywords:** L1, Code Switching, Interference of L1, ELT, TESOL

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Using L1 as a Taboo in ELT*

Teaching English as a foreign or second language has gone through many stages. None of these stages proved to propose the ultimate way for teaching English. Each stage had positive and negative aspects.

Berlitz who started using L2 solely for teaching a second language was on a trip when he remembered that the teacher he had assigned to teach a foreign language did not speak the language of the learners. To his surprise when he returned from the trip, the learners were able to speak the target language. It is at this point that Berlitz decided to ask his teachers to use only L2 in the language classroom.

Later on, many reasons affected the decision of relying on Berlitz's Direct Method.

It is quite important that English language school administrators understand that using the target language alone in the classroom is not as effective as it has been thought to be and as Ford (2009) says "seems to be based on presumptions about pedagogic traditions rather than on findings from rigorous research" (77). Beginner to intermediate students should feel comfortable in the new language in the sense that the new language should not be looked at as an ambiguous and frightening territory. For example, EFL and ESL teachers should draw on the common structures between languages to facilitate the understanding of the foreign / second language structure.

Recent voices started to arise against the claim that only L2 should be used in the classroom. The point is that many EFL teachers who speak the language of their students use L1 in their classrooms for a variety of reasons; and as long as the use is well planned, there is no harm. Harry Meyer (2008) includes reasons to use L1 in the language classroom and affirms, "the students' L1 can assist in making the classroom a more comprehensible place and help lower the effective filters when used [in certain ways]" (p. 148).

In this paper, I will examine a specific context in which students are fluent in English and see how they react to their teachers' use of L1.

The fact that the examined students are fluent in English and comfortable using it as a non-native language helps this paper find out whether using L1 is a major problem for them.

Students can benefit from making comparisons and contrasts between the target language and their first language as many languages share certain grammatical structures and vocabulary words. In a personal experience, my first French teacher showed us the common words between French and my native language in the very first lesson and explained that at that time we had enough vocabulary to start speaking French. Schweer (1999) asserts that students not only increase their knowledge of the second language but also become the center of learning, not the curriculum or the teacher when he says that the "benefit of L1 use justify its limited and judicious use in the second or foreign language classroom. Moreover, if we take the goal of creating a student-centered classroom seriously, my findings [...] prove that a second language can be learned through raising awareness to the similarities and differences between L1 and L2" (p.13).

### 1.2 Strategic Use of L1 to Bridge Between Languages

As learning English is becoming a necessity in life, learners from different levels and particularly those who speak a non-Latin-derived language and those who study English as a compulsory subject in their schools need to be assisted by their first language when necessary. Strategic use of L1 helps learners accept English faster.

Having clear reasons for using L1 in or outside of the classroom and a considerable amount of usage makes it effective and helpful to the learning process of the learners. Paul Nation (2003) states that it can also help the learners to be more “actively involved in coming to grips with the ideas” (3) when they are working on a task. None of the students would be staring and unable to understand what is going on. In such occasion, better students will equip less competent students with some vocabulary words and ideas and prepare them to take an effective part in the activity.

English language teachers should, for example, have a clear idea about why and when they will use L1 as part of their lesson plan. They should also explain how this usage would assist the learners.

### 1.3 Literature Review

Canagraian (1999) discusses the attempts of forcing English as the only means of communication between teachers and students in the classroom in *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. He explains in his book that “the English language has had a history of imperialism for political and material reasons in most periphery communication, often in competition with native languages” (1999: 56). Canagraian characterizes L2-only practices as “oppressive” (op. cit.: 125).

Cagri Tugrul Mart (2013) highlights instances in which English language teachers can use L1 effectively in a way that does not affect the learning of English. In his study, he points out the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in ESL concluding that the use of L1 “cannot be avoided” (13) under any circumstances.

Another treatise of the imposition of English in ELT appears in Phillipson’s discussion (1992) of the “monolingual fallacy” (185-193). Phillipson claims that monolingual English education was first used in the primary and secondary schools of former British colonies. In such contexts, the monolingual approach has been criticized because it “legitimizes the ignoring of local languages and the cultural universe that these language mediate” (op. cit.: 254).

In a study on Chinese learners by Liu Jingxia (2010), some occasions of when to use L1 are stated with examples of situations that show how teachers of English use Chinese in an appropriate manner and how the students react to it. His study shows that “code-switching to Chinese is a good strategy of efficiency and benefits EFL classroom” (21).

## 2. Method

To investigate the topic, I designed two distinct surveys and distributed one of them to a sample of 30 respondents each. The survey was created with surveymonkey.com and posted on my Facebook account where there are many EFL / ESL students and teachers.

A specific survey is designed for the students to measure their acceptance of the use of L1 by their teachers and another one is designed for the teachers to learn about their motives and attitudes for and toward using L1 while teaching English.

The study will suggest that teaching English should not be very strict against using the first language of EFL students when possible and necessary.

### L1 vs L2:

L1 is usually used to refer to the first language or mother tongue of someone. It is the language that is acquired from family and the environment.

L2 refers to the target language, which is English in this study.

The Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics distinguishes between L1 and L2 when it says, “L1 is used in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and error analysis to designate a speaker’s ‘first language,’ ‘native language,’ or ‘mother tongue.’ In contrast, L2 designates the second or target language.” (p. 623)

### EFL:

EFL is an acronym for English as a Foreign Language. The acronym is usually used for students who study English outside of the English-speaking countries; namely the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Students of English as a foreign language usually use English only in the classroom.

### ESL:

ESL is an acronym for English as a Second Language. The acronym is usually used for students who study English in an English-speaking country; namely the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Students of English as a second language use English inside and outside of the classroom in their day-to-day life.

The participants in the first survey are students I taught at high school level and are now spread all over the world in English speaking countries (30%) and non-English speaking countries (70%) and are continuing their education in both high school and undergraduate levels.

### 2.1 Background of the Sample

For the purpose of this investigation, I relied on specific students, most of whom had had experience with both English-only speaking teachers and teachers who switch between English and their mother tongue.

### 2.2 Participant Characteristics

These students study / studied at the Little Village School where I used to teach. Their proficiency level in English is high. The Little Village School teaches an American curriculum and most of the students have visited / lived in an English speaking country.

This sample is suggestive because their fluency in English makes them even much more comfortable interacting with an English environment alone.

The participants of the second survey are teachers who worked with me in school or higher education levels. Some of the teachers are CELTA or TESOL certified, while others have taken other types of professional training either as part of their institution's development plans or to develop their own skills. This shows that these teachers are well-qualified in teaching English.

### 2.3 Sampling Procedures

I posted the surveys on my Facebook account and asked the students and teachers to answer them. 30 students and 30 teachers answered the questions of each survey. Surveyed students and teachers used to live and study in Arabic-speaking countries, mostly in Syria, but are now spread over many English and non-English speaking countries including.

#### 2.3.1 Sample Size, Power, and Precision

30 EFL / ESL students and 30 English language teachers took the survey. As both students and teacher are fluent in English and have no difficulties using English alone, studying them could show, through their experience learning / teaching English, whether or not using L1 is an appropriate practice.

#### 2.3.2 Measures and Covariates

There are two factors that should be considered while looking at the results of this study. First, the participants' first language, Arabic, does not use the Latin alphabet. Although there are common vocabulary words and grammatical structures between the native language of the participants and English, the two languages do not descend from the same family. Second, the participants' experience in learning / teaching and proficiency in using the English language is a reliable one in the sense that they can evaluate methods and strategies.

The online questionnaires measure their personal beliefs towards using L1 based on their sufficient experiences.

## 3. Results

The study shows that around 72% of the teachers use L1 in or outside of the classroom although 64% of the teachers' administrators insist that they do not use the mother tongue of the students particularly in the classroom. It should be mentioned here that 5% of the surveyed teachers do not speak the first language of their students.

More than half of the surveyed teachers (55%) do not feel guilty about using the first language. Only 36% of the teachers claim that their students will not understand the second language better if L1 is used in teaching them. Around 45% of the participants claim that they do not need L1 to control their classes and 64% said that they can create better relationships with their students in L2. It should be not here that 70% of the surveyed teachers teach intermediate and higher levels.

Most students (85%) showed that they are not completely against their teachers' use of L1. Only 32% of the participants believed that it is because their English language teachers cannot fully explain lesson in English, they use their first language. On the other hand, the same students (89%) agreed that using L1 does not help them improve their use of English and not only this but also (88%) said that using English as the only medium of interacting in the English classroom will make their mastery of English higher. The results also showed that 22% of the students use their first language to ask their teachers about what they do not understand and 33% ask one of their friends using their L1, whereas 28% stay silent and check the information when they get back home. None of the students, who were not given the choice of saying that they ask for clarification in the target language but they had an 'other' choice, chose the 'other' option and say that they use L2.

Although most of the teachers (72.73%) said that they do not have a problem using L2 alone in the classroom, (54.55%) of them do not feel guilty about translating or using L1 with their students. As for understanding better, only 36.36% believe that L1 does not help. The teachers surveyed had different attitudes towards class control and creating relationships with students using L1. In the comments, some teachers mentioned that it is important to use L1 and that the 'strategic' use, as one of them called it, 'with words rather than phrases' does not affect but creates a sense of ease for the students.

## 4. Discussion & Conclusion

Using L1 should not be completely avoided. Administrators must encourage their English language teachers to add a section in their lesson plans about how, when, and why they will use L1 to make it a controlled practice rather than leaving it open though some instances would require unplanned but concise interference of the mother tongue of the learners.

As this study shows, even more advanced learners accept, to a certain extent, that their teachers use L1 and teachers understand that the first language of their students is part of their ELT practice.

Teachers of English as a foreign language can use the L1 of their students to introduce some vocabulary words and grammar. L1 will be used as such to build a solid basis for what the students will learn in the lesson. However, this use should be very limited and well thought of to keep the focus on the target language.

Although some believe that using L1 can be helpful to build relationships with learners, socializing, as a less formal situation, is encouraged to be in L2 as the learners would not feel the pressure for accuracy and fluency that is usually feared of in the classroom. It is clear that most students use L1 to inquire about what they do not understand in the classroom, which shows that they feel more comfortable, confident, and less frightened when they use their mother tongue. However, the teacher should always keep the balance between demonstrating his / her ability to use L2 alone and the ease of the learners.

It cannot be stressed enough that the use of L1 should be well planned and thought of so that it does not exceed its limits and cause the students to think solely in their first language. Teachers should always remember that they have so many resources that can be very helpful to enable students to understand English such pictures, gestures, and technology and that L1 is the last resource to use.

Teachers of English should also remember that even when they use L1 at certain occasions, they should stress that their learners use as much English as they can and increase the amount of spoken English as they progress in the course.

Further research should cover how and when to use L1 in a very specific manner so that it can be added to TESOL and TEFL lesson plan books.

### Sponsoring information

The Research Council and Al Buraimi University College, the Sultanate of Oman.

### References

- Bussmann, H. (1998). *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Canagraian, A. S. (1999). *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cook, G. (2014). *Reassessing Translation and Own Language Use*. Webinar: Cambridge English Teacher.
- Ford, K. (2009). Principles and practices of L1/L2 use in the Japanese university EFL classroom. *JALT journal*, 31(1), 63-80. Retrieved March 6, 2015 from <http://www.jalt-publications.org/archive/jj/2009a/art3.pdf>
- Harris, R. (2014). *L1 in the Language Classroom*. Webinar: Cambridge English Teacher.
- Jingxia, L. (2010). Teachers' code-switching to the L1 in EFL classroom. *The Open Applied Linguistics Journal*, 3, 10-23. Retrieved March 1, 2015 from <http://zanjansadra.ir/attaches/22906.pdf>
- Meyer, H. (2008). *The Role of L1 in L2 Acquisition*. *Novitas-ROYAL*, 2(2), 138-153.
- Nation, P. (2003). The Role of the First Language in Foreign Language Learning. *Asian EFL Journal* 5(2), 1-8. Retrieved March 3, 2015 from <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/publications/paul-nation/2003-Role-of-L1-Asian-EFL.pdf>
- Pan, Y., and Pan, Y. (2010). The Use of L1 in the Foreign Language Classroom. *Colomb. Appl. Linguist. J*, 12(2), 87-96. Retrieved March 3, 2015, from <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/calj/v12n2/v12n2a07>
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schweers, W. J. (1999). *Using L1 in the L2 classroom*. *English Teaching Forum*, 37(2), 6-13
- Tugrul Mart, C. (2013). The Facilitating Role of L1 in ESL Classes. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 3 (1), 9-14. Retrieved March 3, 2015, from <http://www.hrmar.com/admin/pics/1400.pdf>