

## USING L1 IN THE CLASSROOM: MONOLINGUAL AND BILIGUAL APPROACHES

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### ABSTRACT:

*USING L1 IN THE CLASSROOM HAS GONE THROUGH TWO DIFFERENT AND OPPOSED PERSPECTIVES. THERE ARE THE VIEWS WHICH SEE THIS APPROACH AS SOMETHING FORBIDDEN AS IT DISCOURAGES LEARNERS TO GAIN CONFIDENCE IN THEIR LANGUAGE USE AND IMPEDES THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE ARE THOSE WHO CLAIM THAT L1 IN THE CLASSROOM CAN BRING MOSTLY BENEFITS RATHER THAN DRAWBACKS. THIS PAPER FOCUSES ON BOTH THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THIS METHOD AND IT ALSO PROVIDES SOME PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF SITUATIONS AND CLASS ACTIVITIES WHICH CAN LEAD TO A BALANCED CONSIDERATION OF THE TOPIC. THE CONCLUSIONS OF THIS PAPER CAN BE REACHED BY EACH TEACHER INDIVIDUALLY ACCORDING TO THE SITUATIONS HE ENCOUNTERS EVERY DAY IN HIS CLASSES.*

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**KEY WORDS:** DIRECT METHOD, GRAMMAR METHOD, 'SANDWICHED' INSTRUCTIONS, CONCEPT CHECKING QUESTIONS

### 1. GENERAL REMARKS: L1 – WHEN, WHY AND HOW?

Using L1 in the classroom is still a controversial theme in the field of teaching foreign languages. There have been many arguments in favor or against using your native language when teaching English, or any other foreign / second language, but none has proved strong enough to convince the teacher to adopt one single perspective. Why is that? One answer might be that no matter what perspective you feel more confident with, there is always something which might contradict you. In this article we shall discuss the advantages and the drawbacks of using L1 in the classroom together with some practical examples of using L1 with our students.

The first question which arises is how authentic can L2 be in the classroom. There are more theories related to the question of using L1 when teaching foreign languages. One view claims that teaching foreign languages should be contrastive, namely to use both mother tongue and foreign language when teaching in order to highlight the similarities and the differences between these two languages. Thus students are able to compare and better understand some linguistic concepts, facts, phenomena etc. through their mother tongue. They are aware of the difference and their language gets more accurate. Nevertheless, this teaching perspective is considered traditional and even quite old-fashioned.

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On the other hand, we should refer to the monolingual theories, which are considered more modern and student oriented. According to these monolingual views, using your students' native language in the classroom impedes correct language acquisition and fluency and it tends to promote only academic or very formal language. The most widespread belief has been that the best medium to teach a foreign language is through that particular language, by immersion and providing the input in L2: explanations regarding grammar, vocabulary and cultural facts, instructions, texts, exercises etc. Therefore, using L1 or using translation as a teaching method has a great deal of opponents. They claim that students are not exposed to natural contextualized language and input. Moreover, there can appear linguistic interferences between students' mother tongue and the foreign language. *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, hereinafter CEFR, assumes that the language learner aims at becoming an effective language user<sup>1</sup>, so the exposure to different communicative situations in L2 provides the efficient background of language acquisition. The foreign language class should give students the opportunities to use the language interactively, despite the artificial classroom conditions, "by a combination of conscious learning and sufficient practice to reduce or eliminate the conscious attention paid to low-level physical skills of speaking and writing as well as to morphological and syntactic accuracy, thus freeing the mind for higher-level strategies of communication"<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, these diktats have their own exceptions. One of them is the so-called Grammar Translation method which focuses on accuracy, a written one, which does not leave enough room for oral fluency. The main problem occurs in multilingual classes, where more than one language is spoken. But can these monolingual approaches be part of a multicultural society? It depends on what teachers understand by a monolingual approach. There are many teachers who decide to use L1 in their own advantage. In this paper, we shall provide some examples in which L1 is used in both the teacher and the student's interest.

## **2. THE ADVANTAGES OF USING L1 IN THE CLASSROOM OR WHEN IT IS ALLOWED TO USE IT**

It is impossible to imagine that our students do not have the tendency to speak their native language during the foreign language class in a monolingual group, namely without any other nationalities. They feel strange if the teacher asks them to speak in English in their group if they use their language during breaks or in interpersonal relations. Thus, no matter how much the teacher monitors, L1 is still there. So the question is: can the students' own language be used in the teacher's advantage? The answer is positive as the teacher has to create the context and to design the rules. For instance, teachers can use L1 when explaining grammar rules or vocabulary items. Thus, using L1 eases the teaching process in a great deal of situations, such as explaining advanced grammar contents, abstract words (meanings, concepts), concrete lexical items or idioms that have a similar correspondent in L1. Teaching the rules of second and third conditionals in English to Romanian students whose native language is a Romance one, could be more efficient if, along with the examples and situational contexts, the teacher gives their Romanian counterpart. In Romanian, for instance, there is a one-to-one translation of these conditional clauses which students understand better and faster when translating them rather than trying to convey their meaning through other explanations. These explanations could be too theoretical or difficult. The teacher saves time and the students understand faster by using contrastive teaching methods.

Another advantage and practical situation when L1 is accepted in the class is when giving instructions regarding exercises or activities. This method is called 'sandwiching', when

<sup>1</sup> Online resource: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf), accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, p. 168.

the teacher first gives instructions in English, then he / she translates the key words and after this he repeats the instructions in English. This method helps the students be aware of the language structure used in class, minimalizes teacher's talking time, if any extra instructions were needed, and facilitates a better understanding of the activity. In addition, next time the teacher will give the same instructions to this class they will have already been exposed to them and the teacher will keep a record of the language he / she has sandwiched to reinforce. On the other hand, this type of method works mainly with low level classes whose attitude towards the translation is a positive or a neutral one. There are also classes who might prefer English only explanations or others who might request bilingual dictionaries or grammar books.

Furthermore, there are cases in which the teacher has to explain abstract concepts or the meaning of words denoting concrete objects to his students. The task is a difficult one, as not all the students have the same background of information or language and the explanations should be intelligible to the whole class. In the case of the concrete objects, the teacher can use the ostensive definition, namely he / she can draw it or show that particular object to the class. But there are many other situations in which the object cannot be found in the classroom or the teacher cannot draw it. Moreover, what happens when the concept that must be explained is an abstract one? One solution comes from using the L1 resources by asking one student to translate the concept into their native language. This way the teacher gains useful time, as he / she will not try to define a well-known concept using useless explanations and the students understand faster and better, by referring to a concept they already possessed.

Being aware of students' own language and the possible mistakes that can occur will help both teachers and authors of textbooks structure and identify the most suitable vocabulary activities and language drills. This will improve students' attitude towards the process of learning as they will feel that textbook actually helps them learn and it is not another dull method. Moreover, language acquisition is a skill acquired through practice rather than the detailed explanation offered by a textbook or a grammar book. Nevertheless, we cannot model this language acquisition without grammar rules or any other metalanguage structures.

Another question that arises is how much can we compare native language acquisition to foreign language acquisition and how much do they have in common? All students will inevitably make comparisons between their own language and the one they want to achieve. This can be used as an important resource for the teacher in the class because he / she can anticipate the type of problem his students might have. For instance, teachers can transform the types of mistakes they know their students will make into activities which will help the students become aware of the mistakes. Using online translation tools, such as Google Translate, can become a useful resource in class. For example, students receive a portion of a text they have already worked on in class translated into their native language with Google Translate. As this tool is due to mistakes, there will be for sure instances for them to correct or adjust and they also see their language is a tool of creating a new text.

This general denial of using L1 in the classroom has its origins in previous teaching methods which emphasized the grammar acquisition more than any communication skill. This idea is also mentioned by Jim Scrivener<sup>3</sup> who states that one of the teachers' problems when using L1 in the classroom is that their own training or their current workplace has discouraged them to use it. There are many private schools or language centres which forbid the use of L1 in their classes. This over-strong reaction to L1 has its origins in previous teaching styles when L1 was used exclusively when explaining grammar and the students learnt English not in context but just like any other school subject, ignoring its social role. Teachers used English only to explain grammar and their students did not get the chance to hear any English. In this

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Scrivener, *Learning Teaching. A guided book for English language teachers* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2005) 308-312, p. 308.

traditional teaching class, the language input is limited to a written and textual approach and the examples given in order to illustrate different grammar contents or word meanings. Moreover, the (oral) communicative activities were quite rare, teacher-controlled, and the (structural) exercises aimed the accuracy of language and not the fluency. Scrivener also mentions a set of useful situations when L1 can be used in the classroom, some of them are: using L1 when dealing with pronunciation issues (comparing English pronunciation to the same sound in the students' native language) or comparing the same sentence translated into English in different ways and identifying the main similarities or differences (this way teachers can emphasize the disadvantages of word-to-word translations). There are many other authors<sup>4</sup> who claim that in monolingual classes, using L1 could be efficient in order to explain aspects of pronunciation or grammar that students with the same L1 could encounter during the process of learning. There are situations when the teacher can make some short cuts by translating words or phrases. The use of bilingual dictionaries can be particularly efficient as a study skill activity. Finally, translation of texts (L1 < > L2) can also be an effective way of learning, especially at higher levels when students must get to grips with subtle nuances of L2, after acquiring a large amount of basic knowledge.

One more argument in favor of using L1 in the classroom recognizes its advantage when teaching writing classes. There are many differences in terms of layout between writing exam tasks for English exams and writing in the students' native language. Comparing the two of them will help the students understand better the differences both in terms of the academic language used and the layout imposed by such a task.

Another problem in beginner or elementary classes is the students' reluctance to using English, as they feel it is much too challenging for them to use English when they do not possess so much knowledge. Beginner or young students need more input in L1 in order to understand different concepts, rules or instructions related to exercises, activities, homework etc., as they do not possess previous linguistic knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, linking words, everyday words and phrases etc.). Moreover, there is also the case of other languages, such as German, Russian, Greek etc., which are considered more difficult. Could the teacher use only L2 in the classroom? The answer is affirmative, but the L1 and L2 input should be balanced, at least in the first stages of learning.

Teachers must then find a method to reduce learners' wariness and encourage them to take the risk of speaking in English. This is where pair work activities change the situation. Working first in pairs and then acting out their dialogues will encourage reluctant students to face and handle the situation better than any other technique. In their pairs they will use both English and their native language, they will not feel ashamed to speak in front of the others on the spot and they will gain confidence in their partner. For beginners or even elementary it is better to ask them to speak in pairs first in their own language if they have to brainstorm ideas for a certain speaking topic. This helps them find arguments or ideas without minding too much about the language barrier. Then, they can even translate these ideas into their own language or change partners, form other pairs in which they should speak in English only. This exercise will help less confident students take away the pressure of speaking in public. If they are given the chance to speak in pairs and to find their arguments in their own language it will increase their ability to develop arguments in a foreign language. This method is not just a simple rehearsal but a way to overcome a challenge.

In conclusion, learning a foreign language is always a very dynamic process mostly based on previous acquisition and knowledge. One of the most significant resource students can bring to their language acquisition is their existing linguistic knowledge scaffolded

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Gower, Diane Philipps, Steve Walters, *Teaching Practice. A handbook for teachers in training*, (Oxford: Macmillan, 2005), pp. 63-64.

between the linguistic elements they have already gained and the new ones. Mastering other foreign languages, the native language classes, the linguistic and general knowledge can ease the process of acquiring new foreign languages.

### **3. THE DRAWBACKS OF USING L1 IN THE CLASSROOM AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM**

Students need a lot of input in the new language and the teacher is the only one who can give it to them. Even if the teacher decides to focus on L1 when giving instructions, for instance, there is the risk that he / she might continue the lesson in L1 as it may seem easier. The teacher should always remember that the best way to help the students is grading the language and using English naturally according to the students' knowledge and not using their own language and then feeling guilty about doing this.

On the other hand, there are plenty of teachers who have learned English through the Direct Method and who had to work more on developing their speaking skills than other teachers who were taught in an English speaking environment. The Grammar Translation was an easy target to achieve. Furthermore, this situation led to a generalized feeling of frustration after the 1960's if the teachers used L1 in the classroom. They used to be seen as weak teachers, who were not able to explain and teach exclusively in English. There are still viewpoints that consider the use of L1 in the classroom vicious. It is said it impedes communication and fluency, it is boring and dull; it shows the teacher's laziness and most students feel they don't learn real English. Also, the students tend not to trust the knowledge transmitted by their teacher if he / she has ever used L1 when explaining something. The teacher loses his / her language authority in front of the students. So how can he / she regain it? The teacher is the model in his class and if he is using L1 he / she cannot forbid his / her students to do it afterwards. One possible solution is to actually recognize the need of using L1, for instance when giving instructions or asking CCQs (concept check questions). The teacher can allow the students to answer in L1 to these CCQs or even to add the question: *Who can tell me in Romanian what you have to do / what I have just said?* Remember that most students are like chatterboxes in their first years of study. They want to register as much as possible all the language used naturally.

There is also the problem concerning the number of students in one class. Even if the teacher wants to use English exclusively we have to remember that most on class management behaviour instructions or corrections are given in L1. For example, if a teacher wants to maintain discipline the first language he / she will use is L1 and not English, mainly for the impact it creates. On the other hand, it also saves time and the message is clearly understood. Therefore, how much of the teacher talk in one class is in L1 and how much is in English? The percentage increases also if we refer to teachers who teach kindergarten students or beginners.

Most teachers consider a direct relationship between the time used speaking L1 and the time spent using English. The more L1 we use the more English speaking time we lose. More L1 in the class means less English. This also leads to the situation in which our students refuse to think in English directly, but still refer to their L1. This will have consequences in time, when dealing with speaking exams when there is no time for L1. But, we cannot prevent learners from thinking in their own language no matter what we do. Their mind is not divided into two parts, English and their L1, they combine, and therefore a teacher cannot actually separate L1 from English. When the learners reach a B2 or above level, they also gain flexibility when using their language and so it seems they are using it as close as possible to native speakers. Nevertheless, L1 interference will not disappear completely.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the above mentioned, we shall conclude that the correct question teachers should ask themselves is not whether to use L1 in their classrooms, but how much and when, according to a great deal of factors: students' level, age, interests, language etc. Every teacher has his / her own answer, but one suggestion which results from this paper is that L1 might be useful when giving instructions, maintaining discipline or increasing low-level groups' confidence when speaking in public.

On the other hand, teachers should not see L1 as a way of avoiding their role in the classroom. They have to make sure they grade their language to the students' level and not use L1 if or when they do not know how to adapt to their students' needs. Also, even if controversial, the translation method still carries its advantages not only when teaching, but also when practicing or revising different grammar rules or vocabulary items. There are many cases when this method helps reduce time by limiting teacher talking time (TTT) and creating a safer context for the students to achieve language. Thus, used properly, the translation method can facilitate grammar understanding or vocabulary acquisition, along with other traditional (structural exercises, contrastive teaching method) or modern methods (debate, interactive and communicative activities). Teachers should be seen as almost native-speakers for their students, but when necessary they have to renounce this mask and make use of the shared language. They have to select in a very good way the situations when this is possible so that they will still be seen as the models.

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