The Use of L1 in Communicative English Classrooms

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The question of whether or not to use students' first language (L1) in foreign language classes is especially relevant in culturally homogeneous environments such as Japan, where the majority are monolingual. Modern teaching methodologies tend to overlook the use of L1. In this paper I will: (1) review the literature on language teaching and the use of L1, (2) discuss when and when not to use L1, and (3) consider the pros and cons of native English speaking teachers' fluency in L1.

L1 and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): Mixed Views

There is little to show that the advocates of communicative pedagogy address the use of L1 (Atkinson, 1993; Harmer, 1983). Swan (1985) claims mother tongue interference hampers L2 (English) acquisition, yet, he also says direct translations can be easier than using L1. In literature on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), there is a curious absence of discussion of the use of L1:

If . . . the mother tongue is a central element in the process of learning a foreign language, why is it so conspicuously absent from the theory and practice of CLT? Why is so little attention paid, in this and other respects, to what learners already know? (p. 96)

Even during my RSA (Royal Society of Arts) training in Australia, which focussed on CLT and all-L2 instruction, there was no discussion of the merits of using L1. In reality, the current "use only L2" trend may have more to do with commercial expediency and low-level L1 competence among native-English speaking teachers than ideal pedagogy (Weschler, 1997).

Despite the absences noted above, more attention is currently being given to L1 use and its place in CLT. More coursebooks are recommending controlled use of L1. The Headway series (Soars & Soars, 1996) utilizes translations of sentence structures to contrast the grammar of L1 and L2.

Weschler's (1997) hybrid of CLT and the grammar-translation method, which he calls the "Functional-Translation Method," emphasizes the social meaning of everyday language and makes use of students' L1 for comparative analysis of L2. Chapman (1958), an early defender of L1, wrote, "There is no open Method with a capital M which excels all others. . . plain commonsense should indicate that the mother-tongue has its place among these methods" (p. 34). He lists the do's and don'ts of L1 use which is a precursor of later lists.

Wills (1981), in a language teacher's coursebook that includes phrase lists for non-native teachers, emphasizes the teacher's role in maintaining English as the language of instruction and communication. However, she acknowledges that "occasionally L1 may still be useful" (p. xiv).

Atkinson (1993) integrates communicative methodology with selective and limited use of L1 and noted:

It is impossible to talk of a 'right balance' or a perfect model for using L1--it's not that simple. L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and in appropriate ways. (p. 2).

The struggle to avoid L1 at all costs can lead to bizarre behavior: One can end up being a contortionist trying to explain the meaning of a language item where a simple translation would save time and anguish. Further, learning a language is a difficult and often frustrating process for many learners, particularly at low levels. One hundred-percent direct method can be especially frustrating--limited use of the L1 can have a powerful, positive effect here. According to Atkinson (1993), "For many learners (in particular adults and teenagers), occasional use of the L1 gives them the opportunity to show that they are intelligent, sophisticated people" (p.13).

The consensus among these researchers is that English should be the primary medium of instruction. Within this realm, however, there is definitely a place for L1. The following section will show when and how L1 can be successfully implemented.

The Basics of Using L1

L1 is most useful at beginning and low levels. If students have little or no knowledge of the target language, L1 can be used to introduce the major differences between L1 and L2, and the main grammatical characteristics of L2 that they should be aware of. This gives them a head start and saves a lot of guessing. Later on, comparative analysis of L1 and L2 can illustrate how basic utterances like "What's the matter?" can't be directly translated (Weschler, 1997). Weschler (1997) shows how, in creative information gap activities, students can learn many of these utterances which convey ideas that are useful to them.

Students in monolingual classrooms often have common training in L1 which may benefit them in learning a new language. A teacher can exploit their students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2. For example, if students understand the concept of a noun, it is much simpler to translate the word "noun" than to describe it in L2. A teacher without knowledge of their students' L1 learning experience is more likely to teach the students what they already know about language. CLT doesn't necessarily take into account the students' training in L1 or L2 and therefore, as a method, doesn't exploit their ability to analyze a new language.

Yamamoto-Wilson (1997) looked closely at Japanese and English grammar and explained how two languages can have divergent principal branching directions, which can make acquisition of one of them as a second language more challenging. He points to the failure of teachers to make meaningful connections between L1 and L2 as a probable contributor to the high failure rate of L2 learners in contrast to the success of children acquiring their mother tongue (p. 9).

Lee (1965) has shown how some teacher knowledge of L1 is also valuable for understanding learner's mistakes caused by L1 interference. For example, the knowledge that Japanese is a syllabic language would explain why Japanese learners expand consonant clusters into full syllables, turning "McDonald's" into "Makudonarudo." The knowing teacher can then tailor the syllabus to focus on consonant clusters.

Questions to consider in using L1 at low levels are whether activities should be limited in their complexity so that L1 is not needed for instruction, or whether some activities justify its use because of their communicative/functional value. In large, multi-level classes, the logistics and preparatory instructions for activities can be very time consuming. It is surprising how far a little L1 can go in these situations towards making an enjoyable task possible. Large classes put a greater strain on communication because there is less opportunity for feedback. In small classes there is less justification for using L1. Willis (1981) advocates a liberal approach to using L1:

There are times when it is preferable and more economical as far as time is concerned to drop English for a few seconds. . . For example, . . . to explain the meaning or use of a new word. . . to explain the aims of your lesson... as a check of your students' understanding. . . and to discuss the main ideas after a reading (p. xiv).

Weschler (1997) suggests using L1 for warm-up brainstorming. Abstract words or expressions difficult to explain (or demonstrate using Total Physical Response) in L2 are better translated. At advanced levels, there is much less tendency to "fall back" into L1 and translation may save time. Sometimes discussion in L1 of lesson aims and areas of difficulty can motivate students. Atkinson (1993) advocates providing "L1 problem clinics" (p. 18) to discuss points the students haven't understood.

When Not to Use L1

During speaking activities there is very little justification for using L1. In creative exercises and games, L1 is largely inappropriate unless the instructions lead to frustration. So too at the listening stage unless the activity requires complicated instructions or there is culturally unfamiliar content that is vital to comprehension. In pronunciation drills L1 is inappropriate except for explaining abstract vocabulary.

The ability to define words and describe things is a useful tool for language learners and they should master it. It is surprising that conversation texts rarely teach this essential language skill. If a word is simple enough it is worth taking the time to define it in L2. When students continue using L1 to explain simple vocabulary or to get out of trouble instead of using "Help" language, they are using too much L1. Japanese should not be used to save students' embarrassment at miscommunication and otherwise placate fears of failure or compensate for lack of motivation. If the class isn't communicating, demonstrate strategies for overcoming difficulties: "I'm sorry, I don't know the meaning or use of a new word . . . to explain the aims of your lesson . . . as a check of your students' understanding . . . and to discuss the main ideas after a reading" (p. xiv).
During tense moments, it can be helpful to use L1 to relax students. However, overuse of L1 in these or other circumstances challenges the very purpose of the class and the integrity of those involved.

**Teachers’ Fluency in L1**

Some language instructors who are fluent in the student’s L1 try to conceal it. Others maintain an “acknowledged pretense” of inability. Regardless of your L1 level, consistently demonstrating that you are not prepared to use L1, you can show your genuine desire for students to acquire the target language. Evidence shows that students’ expectations of teachers’ ability in L1 are less well-informed at elementary levels if the student is an inexperienced language learner than at advanced levels (Calderbank, 1997).

Teachers will find for themselves when L1 is genuinely needed and beneficial. By regularly considering when and how to use L1, and the circumstances under which it will facilitate student learning without making it an onerous experience, teachers can provide a safe and stimulating environment for language learning.

Keeping a list of useful phrases is a good start. I divided my list into four areas: (a) administrative language; (b) grammar expressions; (c) help language (also called emergency or survival English); and (d) explanatory language for instructions (Table 1; see also Chinen, 1995).

### Table 1: L1 Phrase List For Language Instructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>administration</td>
<td>kanri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st semester</td>
<td>zenki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assessment</td>
<td>satei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compulsory</td>
<td>hishu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>examination</td>
<td>shiken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attendance</td>
<td>shusukeki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammar expressions</td>
<td>bumpou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb</td>
<td>fukuri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>fukusu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tense</td>
<td>jisei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help language</td>
<td>Tetsudao go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you say that in Japanese/English?</td>
<td>Nihongo/Eigo de nan to iimasuka?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Explanatory Language and Instructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Let’s review</th>
<th>Fukushu o shimasu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice improvising a conversation</td>
<td>Kakkon nasai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give a quick answer even if you’re not sure.</td>
<td>Jishin ga nakutemo hayaku kotaete kudasai.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Romaji based on Association for Japanese Language Teaching (AJALT) format

Atkinson (1993, p.106) recommends using L1 only if the teacher’s level is higher than that of the students. The best advice for native English speaker teachers might be to avoid L1 only if the students’ level of English is significantly higher than the teachers’ L1 level. However, a teacher’s determination to see English used whenever possible is more important than his or her competency in L1.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown that adult students in monolingual English language classes can benefit from appropriate use of L1 despite the fact that CLT methodology does not fully recognize the value of L1 as a resource. L1 may be used from introductory to upper-intermediate levels on a decreasing scale. At lower levels, translating individual words, explaining grammar use, and facilitating complex instructions can save time and anguish, especially for mature students.

Although fluent L1 speaking teachers are better placed to teach English to monolingual classes at all levels, non-fluent teachers are not significantly disadvantaged, especially at higher levels. Non-fluent L1 speaking teachers are advised to build a generic list of useful L2 that can be translated into L1. They would do well to study up on the characteristics of the L1 and to learn how to use some of it. With regular consideration of when and how to use L1, a teachers’ skills will develop.

**References**


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**Suggestions for Using L1 in the ESL Classroom: Teaching English in the UAE â€“ Use of L1 Within The Communicative Approach.**

OnTESOL â€“ Best online TESOL courses since 2003. Choose from our entry-level 100-hour TESOL course (Only $295!) or our advanced 250-hour TESOL Diploma (Recognized by TESL Canada).Â https://how-to-teach-english.ontesol.com/wp
The issue of whether or not to use the mother tongue (L1) in the English (L2) classroom is a complicated one. Somewhere along the line (probably in the late 70s or early 80s) the idea came into fashion that using the mother tongue in the language teaching classroom was a bad thing. Everything should be done in the target language, giving the learners maximum exposure to that language (in this case English). This probably coincided with a time when ELT publishers realized that it would be cheaper.