The Use of the Student's Native Language in the Classroom,  
in Theory and Practice

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Abstract
For years the use of the student's native language (L1) in the classroom was believed to inhibit the acquisition of the target language (TL), and the best teachers were native speakers who could not, or would not use the L1. However, recently more and more teachers and researchers are questioning this policy. In this paper I wish to briefly discuss some the reasons for the policy, and give my impressions based on my experiences of teaching students of all ages and levels. It is my hope that teachers will be able to use the L1 (wisely) without guilt, and without feeling that they are inadequate or unskilled.

[Keywords] target language (TL), mother tongue (L1), prior knowledge, age specific, learning atmosphere, checking, mimicking, flexibility, comprehension

We are familiar with the biblical saying, *Thou shalt not kill*: A commandment on the surface, at least, appearing above reproach. However on a more practical level, we realize that this most unassailable principle is perhaps less than perfect. For example, how do we apply this law in cases of self-defense, mercy killings, or even punishment to protect society? This great rule now becomes *thou shalt not kill unless …. The fundamental rule is too simple to apply universally.*

Similarly, the ESL world’s prime directive, *thou shalt not use the L1 in the classroom* is often applied with little thought to the practical situations teachers find themselves in, often producing less than optimal results. This tenet, likewise, is too simple to apply to every situation.

Auerbach (1993) takes a look at this rule, where it came from, and why it so dominates the ESL landscape. She suggests that the origin, and power of the rule relate more to politics than sound teaching theory, and that it is time to reconsider our view on the use of the L1 in the classroom. She goes on to indicate that more and more studies are showing that the use of the L1 can indeed aid in learning the TL.

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Along with Auerback, Cook (2001) provides a summary from the literature on the theoretical reasons why the L1 should not be used in the classroom. Basically the arguments are based on the idea that acquiring a language is a natural process, and only the TL is necessary, after all, children learning their native language do not need any other input than the L1. He also points out the argument of interference between the L1 and the TL, and as such they should be compartmentalized to minimize this interference. Furthermore the ultimate aim of language study is to communicate in the TL and thus we must use the TL to allow the students the opportunity to experience it in the most natural way possible. Cooke goes on to argue that while the use of the TL is crucial, it does not necessarily preclude the use of the L1 to enhance the learning experience. Indeed, no matter how hard we try to use the TL exclusively, the L1 tends to creep back in to some extent.

Another study by Levine (2003) took a look at teacher and student attitudes to the use of the L1 and the TL in the classroom. He indicates how, when, and why the L1 is used and how much the TL is used. In short the use of the TL varied depending on who was interacting with who, instructors tended to use mostly the TL when interacting with students, while student-student interaction showed a marked increase in the L1. He also showed that while giving instructions the TL was almost exclusively used yet the L1 was often used when explaining grammar and tests. He also notes that teachers tend to assume there is a degree of anxiety associated with the use of the TL, yet students did not feel this way, with anxiety being reduced the greater the use of the TL. He does however conclude that there appears to be a role for the use of L1 in the classroom.

Schweers (1999) indicates several reasons for the use of the L1, these included using the L1 to explain difficult concepts, and for checking comprehension. He also examines attitudes to the use of the L1, where he found that most students prefer some use of the L1, but not too much, while instructors all felt that some use of the L1 was beneficial. I would like to add my experience to the growing list of teachers who are now reconsidering the ban on the L1 in the classroom.

Upon arriving in Japan many years ago I, like many other teachers, was unable to speak Japanese, so the use of L1 in the classroom was a moot point. The teachers were supposed to provide an authentic example of how to use and communicate in the target language, and we were not supposed to use the L1, if we did we would be chastised by our superiors, or even, in some cases, by our students. The English classroom was supposed to be English only.

Since that time, many years have passed. I now have gained a great deal of teaching experience, as
well as a greater ability to communicate in Japanese. This has led me to consider more and more the use of the L1 in the classroom, its benefits and drawbacks, by either the teachers or the students.

Each class I teach is unique, they are different in the number of students in each class, from private classes to classes of more than 30. They vary in age, from Kindergarten children to elementary school students to college students to senior citizens. They differ in levels, from absolute beginners to advanced level students. They also vary in content, from standard conversion classes to writing classes and grammar classes. And they vary in the time at which they are taught, some in the mornings or afternoons, and others in the evenings. The simple rule-thou shalt not use the L1—does not apply to all cases.

One case where I believe that a little of the L1 goes a long way is in teaching children, particularly elementary school kids. In this situation we are typically teaching students who have almost no knowledge of the TL. We are responsible for teaching all aspects of the language, grammar, vocabulary, listening, and speaking. By utilizing the child's full knowledge, which of course includes his or her understanding of the L1, we can improve the learning process.

When I first started teaching children I adhered to the principle of avoiding the L1 in class. The classes seemed to go well; there were no problems in communicating the task in English only; and the students could perform the task without trouble. However after sometime I decided to ask them the meaning of some words in Japanese. I was shocked when they couldn't answer. It seems as though the students simply remembered the word collocations without understanding the words themselves. As such they act as the Pavlovian dog, responding only the stimulus, with little thought, thereby failing to make the connections necessary for learning. After this I started to use a little more Japanese to explain the meanings of some words, and I found that the students progressed much more rapidly. While we could perhaps change our teaching techniques to help the students make these connections in English only, it would seem that ignoring the students' previous knowledge in L1 is inefficient and unnecessary. However there is one caveat. I found that students who wrote katakana above the English words to help them read the words, tended to learn to read more slowly than did the students who did not use katakana. Hence I discourage this practice, and focus on teaching reading to young children through phonics.

While elementary school students seem to benefit from the use of the L1, younger children especially two or three years old, do not, I believe, need the use of the L1. At this age the L1 is not
so well developed in the children, and they tend to respond to English instruction in the same manner as they do to the L1 instruction. They mimic what you say and they make an effort to complete the task that you asked. Even if they err on their first attempt, they will try and try again until they produce the correct result (older children on the other hand, tend to say “I don't understand” or simply look confused). This is the kind of learning that TL advocates envisioned.

Another area in which I found allowing the use of the L1 useful was when teaching older adult students. In adult classes, grammar is less of an issue since they have all studied at some point in the past, and the main purpose of the class is to make them speak. In this case, it would be natural to try to make an English only environment. However I have found that by allowing them to ask questions in the L1, encourages the student to become more involved and comfortable in the classroom. But as a teacher I will answer the questions in the TL, and if my answer is unclear, allow other students to help out in the L1. This creates a very positive learning atmosphere. If I were to outright ban English in the classroom, I feel the dynamics would be completely changed. I will also occasionally use the L1 on a one to one basis with some students, while avoiding addressing the entire class in the L1. This generally creates a good rapport with the student. Let me add, however that I do believe we ought to try to use the TL as much as possible, I have definitely noticed the student's feeling of accomplishment as they realize how much more of my talk they can understand than when they first began studying.

In as much as I have found that the use of L1 to be beneficial, there have been times where I have wished that I couldn't understand the L1. There are cases where the student, knowing that I am able to understand the L1, will use it to ask questions and carry on conversations, even though they are capable of doing it in the TL, thereby reducing their use of the TL and their fluency. This however, I believe is a function of the student's motivation and purpose of study, and does not represent the majority of students.

Some students feel that English classes should be taught only in the TL, while others are more comfortable and believe that they learn better when the L1 is used to some extent. When teaching in the private sector, the use if the L1 is really a non-issue. The students themselves will choose which type of class they prefer. However in the public sector, at universities or public schools, where the students have little choice, then it is likely that a single simple rule such as Thou shalt not use the L1 will not be effective for everyone. One of the great challenges for teachers is to teach to a large class of students, where each member is unique, each with different abilities, and each with different styles of learning. One single teaching method cannot suit every member of the
My experience has been, while primarily using the TL in class, that the use of the L1 is useful and can lead to both a better classroom atmosphere and better results in the acquisition of the TL. The strict adherence to a single rule is counterproductive, and all teachers must find the appropriate level of the L1 use for their classes, based on their individual situations.

References