L1 in the Classroom: Does it Have a Role?

Paul Freeborn
Ritsumeikan University
paulfreeborn@yahoo.com

Eric Gondree
Nagoya University of Foreign Studies
ericg@nufs.ac.jp

A long-running controversy has surrounded the topic of what role L1 can take in the EFL classroom and the extent to which it should be avoided or used. What part, if any, can L1 play in helping learners to acquire English in a foreign language situation? This paper focused on a review of research on the topic, and examined the implications of that research for the classroom. The preponderance of present thinking is that an appropriate use of L1 can prove beneficial in helping students to improve their understanding of the TL. This paper will argue that the practice of excluding the use of L1 is unsupported by research and explore ways to use L1 in the EFL classroom.

EFLクラスルームにおけるL1の使用が如何なる役割を成し得るか、如何にL1を使用すべきか避けるべきかという議論は、長期に渡り続けられている。L1に役割があるとしたら、外国語シチュエーションで英語習得する学習者の支援において、如何なる役割を果たすか？　本レポートは、このトピックのリサーチの再考察に焦点を置き、そのリサーチのクラスルームに対する影響を分析した。現在の考えで優勢なのは、L1の適切な使用は学生のTL理解を向上させる支援として有益だというものである。本レポートは、L1使用の除外がリサーチで支持されていないことを主張し、EFLクラスルームにおけるL1の使用方法を探求する。

One enduring area of debate in the field of foreign language teaching is what role a learner's native language (L1) can play in the classroom. Whether or not the exclusion of students' L1 can lead to effective language learning deserves careful consideration in light of the existing literature on the matter. Indeed, much research suggests that the occasional use of students' L1 may create a more effective and welcoming classroom while knowledge of the student's native language can be an asset for students and teachers alike. Although the question of L1 in SLA has received enough attention to not be considered a particularly new or unusual issue, the issue still raises controversy and causes friction.

The Argument for Exclusion of L1

Several theoretical objections have been raised to the use of students' L1 in foreign language teaching. Many of these theories developed in the context of an inclination to distance language-teaching from the Grammar-Translation method which relied too heavily on L1 and failed to teach language for communication (G. Cook, 2001). Consequently, many teaching methodologies from the twentieth century regard L1 as counterproductive. One of the most influential teaching theories is the Comprehensible Input theory, in which language acquisition is driven by exposure to understandable TL while L1 is irrelevant (Krashen, 1982). Other prominent teaching methodologies such as the Direct Method (Harbord, 1992) and the Communicative Approach Method (Pennycook, 1994) saw L1 as a source of interference or error-generation. The use of L1 has therefore been discouraged in many modern paradigms of language

teaching.

Many arguments favoring the TL-only position rely on studies which support the idea of a rich use of TL during language instruction and show direct, positive correlations between the amount of input and learner achievement (Larsen-Freeman, 1985; Lightbown, 1991). The use of L1 seemingly deprives students of opportunities to experience as much of the TL as possible (Ellis, 1984). Some EFL teaching contexts mean that students have limited opportunities to practice outside of class so finite class time should maximize their exposure (Burden, 2000). In such situations, the teacher may be the main, or the only, source of TL so it is reasonable to wish to use as much TL as possible (Turnbull, 2001). Although these arguments caution that TL should be used to the greatest possible extent in class, they do not argue for outright L1-exclusion.

For certain stakeholders in a school, a policy of L1-only teaching may seem intuitively attractive (Thornbury, 2006) so that an English-only environment may be a marketing point or an expectation among students and parents (Yphantides, 2009). Additionally, policies favoring English-only teaching may be a fixture of national curricula. For instance, Japan's most recent MEXT EFL curriculum states English should be the language of English instruction (Tahara, 2012). Despite these arguments, evidence supporting the efficacy of L1-exclusion in SLA is limited.

The Argument Against Exclusion of L1 in the EFL Classroom

Rules excluding a student's L1 may raise difficult issues of power, authority and cultural insensitivity in the classroom (Auerbach, 1993). Some researchers suggest that policies to exclude L1 mainly serve the interests of native-speaking English teachers (Raschka, Sercombe, & Chi-ling, 2009) and global publishers of educational materials (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). Because of these concerns, L1-exclusion practices deserve careful consideration. In contrast, perhaps the greatest point in favor of L1 in the classroom is that teachers and students both perceive value

in teachers who have knowledge of the languages of their students (Burden, 2000; Norman, 2008; Schweers, 1999; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003) and having a knowledge of students' L1 can help teachers understand the appropriate ways to use it (Lardiere, 2012). The argument against L1-avoidance rests upon four practical points: reducing students' affective filters, reinforcing student understanding, enhancing classroom management and alleviating difficulties inherent in forbidding students' L1.

First, the use of learners' L1 may lower students' affective filters by reducing anxiety, stress and embarrassment which can result from being unable to communicate before one's peers (Brown, 2000; Meyer, 2008; Nation, 2003). Some scholars suggest that a judicious and occasional use of L1 in teaching can help to build rapport, improve cooperation and convey teacher respect for students' identities (Brown, 2000; Hopkins, 1998, von Dietz & von Dietz, 2007). An ability to communicate in students' L1 can also demonstrate empathy, evince a teacher's willingness to learn new languages, create levity and boost class morale (Barker, 2003; Ford, 2009; Schweers, 1999).

Second, the impact of L1 on SLA is readily evident, such as the extent to which students use their native grammar to construct the grammar of a new language, in addition to using it as their basis of understanding equivalencies in new grammatical structures (Lardiere, 2012). L1 provides the basis for "noticing," in which learners analyze comparisons between their current knowledge and the target language (Ferrer, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). L1 also appears in language-learning through code-switching, "a natural and purposeful phenomenon which facilitates both communication and learning" (Eldridge, 1996, p 310). Finally, L1 may be the most helpful means to explain TL idioms (Rodriguez & Winnberg, 2013) and foreign cultural contexts (von Dietze & von Dietze, 2007) which can add depth to learning.

Third, L1 serves a pragmatic function by aiding classroom management. It can be used to provide students with feedback on their performance in class and address students' requests for clarification (Shimizu, 2006). L1 can assist in discussing

classroom goals (Ellis, 1984) and explaining teaching methodologies (Holthouse, 2006; Meyer, 2008). L1 can also be used to help to guide in-class tasks, handle discipline and provide instructions for testing and assessment (V. Cook, 2001). Due to its role in classroom management, L1 can help teachers increase the amount of time devoted to English because students can more quickly understand assignments, instructions and methods.

Finally, a classroom policy forbidding the use of students' L1 can create a number of problems in both implementation and unanticipated outcomes. The difficulties and conflicts created by enforcement of L1-exclusion is a recurring theme in the experiences of individuals who have attempted to do so (Atkinson, 1987; Butzkamm, 2008; Ford, 2009; Hall & Cook, 2013; Harmer, 2001; Hawkins, 2015; Holthouse, 2006; Raschka et al., 2009; Shimizu, 2006; Yphantides, 2009). A number of researchers have remarked that despite all attempts to ban L1, it will still be present in bilingual dictionaries (Kelleher, 2013), note-taking (Koren, 1997) and as a fixed feature in students' cognition (V. Cook, 1999). The reality is that L1 will persist in the classroom regardless of what rules are in place to discourage it and that a more comfortable and humane language classroom will view L1 as a resource which can be managed productively. To disallow L1 is to deny students a tool for learning.

Principled Inclusion of L1

A case can be made that a carefully selective use of L1 in the classroom is an appropriate supplement to teaching. Naturally, the use of L1 in SLA should be limited and relevant to the teaching situation but the question of when and how requires further research and opinions on the matter differ. For instance, an early proponent of using native language for SLA, Atkinson (1987) suggested that L1 be relatively constrained and used in accuracy-oriented tasks, such as showing misleading differences in meaning between two languages. In contrast, Butzkamm (2003) argues that L1 can be appropriate in a broader range of situations. Carson and Kashihara (2012) recommend that students participate in creating guidelines for L1 so they can feel that their preferences will be respected.

Additionally, use of students' L1 should ideally be purposeful and aligned with the learning objectives of the class while not being overused (Ellis, 1984; Nation, 2003).

How much and when to use L1 appropriately may depend upon a variety of factors. A key consideration is the makeup of students in the class. In situations where teachers are working with a class containing students from different L1 backgrounds, L1 use by the teacher would be highly impractical and socially problematic. In EFL contexts where the teacher is working with students who share the same L1, these issues are less of a concern. It is certainly more appropriate to use L1 with younger, lower-level learners because they will be using their native language as the basis to understand a new language (Harmer, 2001) but more advanced learners also seem more capable of transferring pragmatic strategies from L1 (Maeshiba et al., 1996 as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2012). Rigbom & Jarvis (2009 as cited in Lardiere, 2012) recommend a strategy of teaching grammar to lower-level learners by focusing on the similarities between L1 and L2 to aid understanding. Carson and Kashihara (2012) argue there is an inverse relationship between student language proficiency and a desire for L1 support with student desire for L1 declining as student ability and confidence increases. This inverse relationship is complicated by the fact that higher-level students may also demand L1 support when using more challenging materials.

Implications for the Classroom

There are many English-teaching activities which can harness students' L1 (Deller & Rinvolucri, 2002). Teachers may employ L1 to use class time more efficiently by quickly defining unfamiliar, low-frequency vocabulary that might require lengthy L2 explanation (Ur, 2011). For instance, through the technique of sandwiching, L1 can be used to confirm student understanding of terms with a low disruption to class flow (Butzkamm, 2008). Sandwiching involves introducing a new word in the TL, glossing it briefly in the students' L1, and then repeating it again in the TL. When the teacher must explain challenging linguistic concepts, new vocabulary, errors or difficult grammar,

using students' L1 may also be a time-efficient means of conveying the content (Burden, 2000; V. Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2013).

Students may utilize L1 to more effectively engage in L2 classroom learning. One example is the use of bilingual dictionaries to look up new vocabulary. L1 can be used in activities such as peer discussions, cloze texts, and narration jigsaws (VanderHeijden, 2010). Students' L1 also appears in collaborative and group-work activities, such as situations where students work together to solve a translation problem or brainstorm ideas (Atkinson, 1987; Scott & de la Fuente, 2008). Students may be allowed to use L1 when discussing the meaning of an intensive reading passage and confirm their understanding in pair or small-group discussions. This allows the students to more readily identify differences between the linguistic features of the TL and their L1. Teachers can confirm student understanding in the TL, by asking a student to explain to the class (in the TL) or by doing so themselves. Students also benefit from using L1 while collaborating to prepare group presentations and group projects. Conversely, the use of L1 should be discouraged in activities intended to develop fluency (such as reading graded readers or conversation based speaking activities). In this case, the use of L1, even with the intention of confirming meaning or understanding, detracts from fluency-building. It is also advisable to discourage students from using L1 in situations where they are already capable of saying what they wish to say in the TL.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although a rich use of English should obviously command the major focus of attention in an effective English language classroom, policies trying to accomplish this by forcing exclusion of L1 are not feasible to implement, possibly detrimental and unsupported by research. In contrast, there are multiple reasons to believe there is a positive role for a careful use of learners' L1 in SLA. Although there are many ways a teacher can focus on teaching a TL without resorting to using students' native language, an occasional and reasonable inclusion of L1 can help to boost student understanding, reinforce language

acquisition and improve class management. A working knowledge of students' L1 can therefore be seen as an asset in the classroom, a tool to augment teaching effectiveness and a resource to enhance learning outcomes.

References

Atkinson, D. (1987). The mother tongue in the classroom: A neglected resource? *ELT Journal*, *41*(4), 214-247.

Auerbach, E. (1993). Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, *27*(1), 9-32.

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2012). Pragmatics in second language acquisition. In S.M. Gass, & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 147-162). New York, NY: Routledge.

Barker, D. (2003). Why English teachers in Japan need to learn Japanese. *The Language Teacher Online*, *2*. Retrieved March 28, 2016 from http://www.jaltpublications.org/tlt/articles/2003/02/barker

Brown, H. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching (4th ed.)*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley, Longman.

Burden, P. (2000). The use of students' mother tongue in monolingual English conversation classes at Japanese universities. *The Language Teacher*, *24*(6), 5-10.

Butzkamm, W. (2008). The mother tongue taboo or taking the dogma out of foreign language methodology. *Foreign language education in the 21st century*. Retrieved February 23, 2016 from https://juergenkurtz.wordpress.com/2008/04/01/the-mother-tongue-taboo-or-taking-the-dogma-out-of-foreign-language-methodology

Carson, E., & Kashihara, H. (2012). Using the L1 in the L2 classroom: from the students' perspective. In A. Steward & N. Sonda (Eds.) *JALT 2011 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo, Japan: JALT.

Cook, G. (2010). *Translation in language teaching: an argument for reassessment*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker

in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, *33*(2), 185-205.

Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *57*(3), 402-423.

Deller, S., & Rinvolucri, M. (2002). *Using the mother tongue. Making the most of the learner's language.* London, England: Baskerville Press Ltd.

Eldridge, J. (1996). Code-switching in a Turkish secondary school. *ELT Journal*, *50*(4), 303-311.

Ellis, R. (1984). *Classroom second language development*. Oxford, England: Pergamon.

Ferrer, V. (2005). The use of the mother tongue in the classroom: cross-linguistic comparisons, noticing and explicit knowledge. Retrieved February 19, 2016 from http://www.teachenglishworldwide. com/Articles.php

Ford, K. (2009). Principles and practices of L1/L2 use in the Japanese university EFL classroom. *JALT Journal*, *31*(1), 63-80.

Hall, G., & Cook, G. (2013). *Own-language use in ELT: exploring global practices and attitudes.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Harbord, J. (1992). The use of mother tongue in the classroom. *ELT Journal*, *46*(4), 350-355.

Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching.* Essex, England: Longman.

Hawkins, S. (2015). Guilt, missed opportunities, and false role models: a look at perceptions and use of the first language in English teaching in Japan. *JALT Journal*, *37*(1), 29-42.

Holthouse, J. (2006). The role of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms. *Gaikokugokyoiku Forum*, 5, 27-37.

Hopkins, S. (1988). Use of mother tongue in teaching of English as a second language to adults. *Language Issues*, *2*(2), 18-24.

Kelleher, M. (2013). Overcoming the first language taboo to enhance learning a foreign language. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *93*, 2037-2042.

Koren, S. (1997). Listening to lectures in L2; taking notes in L1. *TESL-EJ, 2*(4), 1-16.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford, England: Oxford

University Press.

Lardiere, D. (2012). Linguistic approaches to second language morphosyntax. In S.M. Gass, & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 106-126). New York, NY: Routledge.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1985). State of the art on input in second language acquisition. In S.M. Gass & C.G. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 433-444). Rowley, MA: Newbury.

Lightbown, P. M. (1991). What have we here? Some observations on the role of instruction in second language acquisition. In R. Phillipson, E. Kellerman, L. Selinker, M. Sharwood-Smith & M. Swain (Eds.), *Foreign language pedagogy research: A commemorative volume for Claus Faerch* (pp. 197-212). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Meyer, H. (2008). The pedagogical implications of L1 use in the L2 classroom. *Maebashi Kyodai Gakuen College Ronsyu, 8*, 147-159.

Nation, P. (1996). The four strands of a language course. *TESOL in Context*, *6*(1), 7-12.

Nation, P. (2003). The role of the first language in foreign language learning. *The Asian EFL Journal*. *5*(2), 1-8.

Norman, J. (2008). Benefits and drawbacks to L1 use in the L2 classroom. In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo, Japan: JALT.

Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Harlow, England: Longman Group Ltd.

Raschka, C., Sercombe, P. & Chi-ling, H. (2009). Conflicts and tensions in codeswitching in a Taiwanese EFL classroom. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *12*(2), 157-171.

Rodriguez, J. & Winnberg, H. (2013). *Teaching idiomatic expressions in language classrooms - Like the icing on the cake* (Master's thesis, Malmö högskola/Lärarutbildningen, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden). Retrieved from http://dspace. mah.se/handle/2043/16123

Schweers, C. W. Jr. (1999). Using L1 in the L2 classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, *37*(2), 6-9.

Shimizu, M. (2006). Monolingual or bilingual policy in the classroom: pedagogical implications of L1 use in the Japanese ELF classroom. *Kyoai Gakuen Maebashi University Ronsyu*, *6*, 75-89.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1999). Linguistic human rights - are you naïve or what? *TESOL Journal*, *8*(3), 6-12.

Storch, N. & Wigglesworth, G. (2003). Is there a role for the use of the L1 in an L2 setting? *TESOL Quarterly*, *37*(4), 760-769.

Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: a step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, *16*(3), 371-391.

Tahara, M. (2012). Behind MEXT's new course of study guidelines. *The Language Teacher*, *36*(3), 3-8.

Thornbury, S. (2006). *The A-Z of ELT*. Oxford, England: Macmillan.

Turnbull, M. (2001). There is a role for the L1 in second and foreign language teaching, but... *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *57*(4), 531-540.

Ur, P. (2011). *L1 in English teaching*, PowerPoint presentation at the ETAI mini-conference, Berlin 2011. Retrieved from http://www.etai.org.il/documents/L111_PennyUr.ppt

VanderHeijden, V. (2010). "Is that English I hear over there?" Rethinking the prohibition on L1 use in foreign language learning. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*. *14*(1), 3-17.

von Dietze, A. & von Dietze, H. (2007). Approaches to L1 use in the EFL classroom. *The Language Teacher*, *31*(8), 7-10.

Yamamoto-Wilson, J. R. (1997). Can a knowledge of Japanese help our EFL teaching? *The Language Teacher*, *21*(1), 6-9.

Yphantides, J. (2009). Student use of Japanese in the EFL classroom. *Accents Asia*, *3*(2), 1-26.

Author's Biography:

Paul Freeborn is a full time lecturer at Ritsumeikan University in Kusatsu, Japan. He has also taught English at Konan University in Kobe and in the United States. He has an MA in English Literature from California State University, Long Beach and a MA in TESOL from Fresno Pacific University. paulfreeborn@yahoo.com

Eric Gondree is a full time lecturer at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies in Nisshin, Japan. He has also taught English at Konan University in Kobe and at SUNY Buffalo in the United States. He has an MBA and an MA in TESOL from SUNY Buffalo. ericg@nufs.ac.jp