First Language Communication in the Second Language Classroom: A Valuable or Damaging Resource?

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements of Education 6390
For the degree of Master of Education

Education 6390
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John’s
Newfoundland and Labrador
March 25, 2010
Abstract

The exact role of one’s first language (L1) in second language (L2) education has not been clearly defined in the literature. A growing body of research exists both criticizing and advocating the use of the native language, but an agreement has not been reached. A more clearly defined set of times, functions and roles of the native language in L2 education may help to better inform the debate. The intention of this paper is to determine whether such criteria exist, and to outline the prevailing arguments in favour of and against use of the L1 in L2 education. The paper concludes that many of the claims denying the value of the learners’ L1 are not founded in empirical research therefore; the author determines that while L2-rich input is essential, the L1 can also serve as a valuable tool in L2 education.
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For the purposes of this paper, the following phrases will be referring to the first language a child acquires from birth: L1, native language, and mother tongue.

Language teachers experience a constant struggle between theory and practicality. Many past and present theories of L2 instruction promote the use of the learners’ L2 in all classroom instruction, thus denying the role of the learners’ L1 in acquiring the L2. On a more functional level however, language instructors often sense the learners’ need for a more unambiguous and stress-free method of communication; a need that can sometimes only be satisfied through interactions in the learners’ native tongue. The question is: Where should educators draw the line? Strictly use the L2 in L2 education, or formulate some other option, an option in which the learners’ L1 and L2 can co-exist and mutually support language acquisition? The objective then, is to determine whether there exist specific times, functions or roles for using the L1 in an L2 class, and the impact of such behaviour on student achievement and ultimately, language acquisition. Conducting research in this area will offer guidance to other L2 teachers who contemplate using and accepting the learner’s L1 as a form of communication in the L2 classroom. By presenting arguments in support of and in opposition to the use of the L1 in L2 instruction, L2 instructors may draw their own conclusions regarding its merit in language acquisition and on student achievement.

This paper will examine past and present theories of L2 acquisition to determine whether a learner’s native language has a place in the L2 classroom. The paper will begin by examining key arguments in the debate over the use of L1 and L2 communication in
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L2 education. Next, the paper will present the reality of language use in the L2 classroom, with a particular focus on instructor and student communication in the L1 and L2. In addition, the paper will discuss the impact of prohibiting the use of the L1, specifically in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and peer interactions. Finally, the paper will conclude with an overview of constructive methods of promoting and useful applications of the L1 and L2, as suggested by L2 research.

To Use or Not to Use the L1: The Debate

A consensus is yet to be reached on whether the mother tongue has any merit in L2 learning. Indeed, arguments advocating the use of the L1 in L2 instruction are countless, but so too are the arguments promoting an L2 experience that is rich in L2 input and purposely deficient in the L1. Arguments calling for a compromise are equally as abundant. Proponents of a compromise envision a language learning context that does not deny the value of either the learners’ L1 or L2. The following discussion will highlight the positions of key researchers in the field, with the hope of bringing teachers closer to reaching a more palatable approach to L2 instruction.

Why Accept the L1? : The Arguments

The present discussion regarding the role of the L1 in the L2 class stems from the growing perception that the L1 is not so much prohibited by recent L2 methods as it is disregarded (Cook, 2001b). Therefore, it is the intention of certain L2 researchers to focus more attention on the potential that the L1 may offer L2 learners. A number of studies have documented the important functions of both the learners’ L1 and L2 in language learning (Atkinson, 1987; Levine, 2003; Turnbull, 2001); functions that echo
those proposed by earlier linguists and scientific theorists such as Henry Sweet and Harold Palmer. Even as early as the late 19th century, leading philologist Sweet acknowledges the value of the native language in acquiring a second or foreign language. From his years of experience teaching and studying languages, Sweet (1964) theorizes that language instruction must “…begin with a knowledge of one’s own language. The first preparation for the study of a foreign language is the acquisition of a thorough knowledge of the peculiarities of one’s own language” (p. 193). Palmer (1956), a leading specialist in the theory and practice of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), also saw the potential of using the native language in learning another. In fact, he considers the use of the L1 as “perfectly harmless and in many cases positively beneficial” (p. 125). More recently is the work of Auerbach (1993), who has determined from her studies of adult English as a second language (ESL) students that beginning L2 instruction in the L1 is beneficial to students: They gain a sense of security and express themselves in ways they may not in an L2-only setting.

The use of one’s native language is also noted to have cognitive, psychological and linguistic functions. By implementing the L1 as a resource in one or all of the abovementioned areas, it serves as a scaffolding tool, preparing students to perform at higher levels in the L2 than would be attainable without the assistance of the L1 (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, 2009; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). A recent study of 12 pairs of EFL university students shows the L1 being used as a cognitive tool in a series of collaborative activities. The pairs are recorded to have used the L1 to enable access to L2 forms, focus attention, retain semantic meaning and create new meaning in the L2 (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, 2009). Additionally, an analysis of
the collaborative speech produced by adult Spanish students reveals that the L1 was used to provide scaffolded help in a collaborative writing activity: Students used the L1 to maintain each other’s interest in the task, develop strategies to complete the task, and discuss methods of solving problems (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). It is important to note however that much of the research cited above on the role of the native language in second and foreign language learning has involved studies of adults and university students. As a result, the exact value of L1 use among younger learners in the areas noted above (i.e., cognitive, psychological and linguistic) is not recognized by the studies referenced.

The L1 also has semantic functions in L2 learning. L2 students routinely make use of various semantically-rooted techniques such as translation, dictionary searches, etc. in their quest for meaning in the L2. However, questions pertaining to the value of such exercises are often at the core of the L1 use debate: Supporters of the L1 encourage translation, and conversely, supporters of L2-rich experiences call for a complete banishment of the method. Translation, and by implication, the use of the L1, is noted to be a pedagogically sound mode of semantic demonstration (Harper, 1968). Similarly, from their observations and recordings of adult Spanish students completing collaborative writing tasks, Anton and DiCamilla (1998) conclude that utterances in the L1 “trigger a semantic analysis” and guide students “to jointly access the L2 forms that are available to them” (L1 and Scaffolding section, ¶5). Arguments against using translation as a language learning tool will be explored later in the section entitled Why Promote the L2: The Arguments?

Furthermore, L1 use allows for valuable interactions to take place, creating a
social space in which students may collaborate to gain control of a task, and further, complete a task that may otherwise be cognitively out of reach (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). A recent study of low proficiency EFL students determined that while performing collaborative tasks (jigsaw, dictogloss, and text reconstruction) the higher level of performance achieved from such interactions served to motivate the learners. Using the L1 as a mediating tool enabled students to collaboratively gain access to L2 forms and find meanings that would be unavailable through exclusive and individual use of the L2 (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, 2009). Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) also report that in their study of ESL students performing a text reconstruction task and a joint composition task, the pairs primarily used the L1 in conversations about vocabulary and meaning, and grammar. The results of the study show that the L1 is often used as a mediating tool to facilitate task completion.

In addition to facilitating interactions between peers and assisting task completion, L1 use is also recorded to affect anxiety levels and other affective barriers to L2 learning. Interviews and conversations with teachers and students learning ESL, Spanish and Haitian through the Student Literacy Corps project and the Bilingual Community Literacy Training project reveal that L1 use has been attributed to successfully lowering levels of anxiety and other affective barriers for students (Auerbach, 1993). Consequently, L2 learners experience higher levels of motivation for learning the L2, and develop a greater sense of comfort participating in pair, group, and whole-class discussions and activities.

Despite the advantages of using the L1 as a resource, instructors are nonetheless
influenced by other L2 research which insists that the L1 must be avoided at all costs. Thus, instructors play games, uses gestures, dance and even employ penalties all in the name of encouraging use of the L2 and deterring use of the L1 (Auerbach, 1993). Pro-L1 research attempts to put a stop to such madness by countering claims that argue against using the native language as a learning tool (Cook, 2001a; Hammerly, 1994; Sweet, 1964). One argument in particular is challenged by such researchers: The notion that one should acquire one’s L2 as one would one’s L1, without the influence of another language hampering acquisition. Cook (2001a) argues that acquiring an L2 is much different than acquiring an L1, based on the reality that there is already another language present in L2 acquisition that does not exist when learning a native language. For this reason, Cook (2001a) asserts “there is no way in which the two processes can be equated” (p. 154). Likewise, Hammerly (1994) points out that programs that place an emphasis on the L2 and ignore the L1 are not successful in preventing or removing language errors. Learning another language does not magically remove the knowledge of one’s L1: One will naturally think in one’s native language, and will also have a perpetual awareness of cross-associations between languages “for the simple reason that every idea is indissolubly associated with some word or phrase in our own language” (Sweet, 1964, p. 199). Clearly, the presence of two language systems within the mind of an L2 learner cannot be denied, regardless of whether such systems are separate or interrelated. The knowledge, and by consequence, the influence of the other language is ever-present, whether the influence exists on a conscious or subconscious level.

As evidenced by the previous discussion, a consensus of sorts has been reached within the pro-L1 camp; resulting in the recommendation that rather than exclusively
encourage or prohibit L1 use, teachers should simply recognize that some use of the L1 is a normal process that allows learners to interact (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003), and assists L2 communication (Brooks & Donato, 1994). In fact, Brooks and Donato (1994) maintain that “verbal thinking mediates one’s relationship with the new language and with language itself (in this case the learners’ L1) and is quite necessary and natural” (p. 268). Other studies have lead researchers to call for a less rigid and more balanced view of the use of the L1 (Atkinson, 1987; Carless, 2008), recommending a ratio of 5% L1 to 95% L2 at beginning levels of language education (Carless, 2008). After all, as Harper (1968) indicates:

While the concrete matter (that is to say, the speech material itself) must necessarily be of the language which is the subject of instruction, it by no means follows that the explanatory matter should also be given in the same language. (p. 173)

As indicated above, the prevailing thought is that instructors and learners will and should make use of the L2, but should not evade use of the L1. Even strategies that place emphasis on maximizing the L2 do not insist that the use of the L1 is thereby harmful (Turnbull, 2001). Thus, a compromise is proposed.

**Why Promote the L2? : The Arguments**

Support for an L2-rich approach to L2 education is prompted by the belief that in order for students to acquire a L2 they require intense amounts of L2 input (Duff & Polio, 1990; Ellis, 2005; Hendrickson, 1991; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Turnbull, 2001). Logically, students require much exposure to the language they are striving to acquire, and since this exposure cannot often be acquired outside the L2 classroom, instructors offer the only L2 input students can freely access (Duff & Polio, 1990). Duff and Polio
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(1990) further cite the importance of presenting as much L2 as possible “serving as many functions as possible” (p. 154). And, while the quantity of L2 is an important matter, Hendrickson (1991) adds that so too is the context in which the L2 is presented:

Instructors must present the L2 in contexts that are both culturally and linguistically appropriate to the study. The merit of the aforementioned principles has motivated a growing group of researchers to incorporate these principles into their own approaches and theories: The natural method (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), the direct method, and the oral method (Fries, 1963) place emphasis upon the use of the L2.

French as a second language education in Newfoundland and Labrador is no exception. In reference to the elementary core French program, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (2002) expects that, “French is the language of the classroom” (p. 41), and “French should be used as the language of instruction in the classroom” (p. 43). Instructors and students in the senior high core French program in Newfoundland and Labrador are also required to use the French language “in all classroom routines to establish and maintain personal relationships, to share ideas and opinions and to get things done” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, p. 13).

Adhering to an L2-rich approach to L2 education is not without some obvious advantages: The learners’ L2 proficiency will improve, as will the learners’ confidence in using the L2. As expected, the more L2 exposure students receive, the more L2 they will learn (Turnbull, 2001). And, when L2 input is meaningful, students learn and acquire the L2 “quickly and successfully” (Ruiz-Funes, 2002, p. 19). Ellis (2005) reaffirms that the more exposure students receive in the L2, “the more and the faster they will learn” (p. 8). Furthermore, L2 exposure is believed to promote spontaneous communication in the L2;
an ability inhibited by the use of the L1, as is the development of proper L2 pronunciation (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008).

Several key assumptions have derived from research justifying the emphasis placed on the L2 and limitations enforced on the L1 in L2 education. First, the L2 should be used in all instruction to curb limitations produced by the L1: overuse resulting in little L2 exposure, and dependence on the L1. Also, without continuous L2 input students tend to lose confidence in using the L2 and as a result, lose interest in or are discouraged from participating in future L2 endeavors (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). Moreover, the process of translation, and by association, the use of the L1 is deemed counter-productive to L2 acquisition. Both Gouin (1892) and Jespersen (1956) deny the value of the process of translation; as such a process does not exist for the native language learner. Gouin (1892) challenges advocates of L1 use and the process of translation as a whole, asking, “Is it making translations from other languages, think you, that the little baby learns its mother-tongue?” (p. 141). Additionally, Jespersen (1956) is quick to highlight “it is not translation (or skill in translation) that we are aiming at in teaching foreign languages” (p. 55). However, because the theories of both authors are not supported by empirical evidence, their perspectives lack the validity necessary to convince this author of their respective positions on the value of translation on L2 learning.

The final assumption set forth stems from the latter: L2 acquisition occurs in a similar manner as native language acquisition. Thus, if children learn their native language without the influence of an L2, then so too will students of second and foreign languages. According to this belief, the key to rid the learner of L1 interference is through L2 acquisition; a process best accomplished through enriched L2 input and
exposure (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In support of this principle Gouin (1982) proposes:

The child in the family only does and only hears exercises in the language he is studying. Does he succeed or no in learning the language there spoken? If yes, it is because the process is a good one: we must preserve it. (p. 142)

As noted above, proponents of an L2-rich approach contend that one’s L2 may be acquired through continuous exposure or immersion in the L2. Consequently, the L1 is regarded as a negative mediating force that ultimately impedes the process of L2 acquisition. Research highlights that the success of an L2-rich approach also depends on instructors using the L2 in a manner that creates “an input-rich environment” in which students may be provided with “optimal opportunities for meaningful use of the target language” (Kim & Elder, 2008, p. 167). In other words, students must continuously hear the L2, see the L2, write in the L2, read in the L2, and speak in the L2 (Jespersen, 1956); though always on a level that is within the learners’ immediate scope of understanding in the language (Bloomfield, 1914). The problem with such an approach however is that learning a second or foreign language is a unique process that cannot be solely equated with learning a native language. The reality is that students of second and foreign languages have access to another language to employ and reference throughout their language studies. The question L2 instructors need to ask themselves is: Will students be encouraged to use the aforementioned language as a useful tool, or instead, be discouraged from acknowledging the very existence of it?

The Reality of Language Use in the Second Language Class

The teaching methods and learning strategies practiced within an L2 classroom vary. Depending on the individual preferences of teachers and students, language instruction and learning takes many forms. In keeping with theory, many teachers strictly
adhere to a set of principles set forth in provincial curriculum or other nationally approved documents, while others prefer to implement strategies more in keeping with personal belief systems. For these reasons, the amount of L1 and L2 used in a language class varies among teachers and students alike.

**Instructor Use of the L1**

L2 research presents a broad spectrum of instructor use of the L1 and L2. Represented at both extremes, percentages of instructor use of the L1 are recorded at 10%, whereas in other instances, percentages of instructor L1 use reach as high as 100%. What is interesting however is that students do not always accurately gauge the amount of L1 used by their instructors; often underestimating the amount of L1 input incurred (Duff & Polio, 1990). Regardless of the actual percentages of L1 teacher talk represented, Cook (2001b) asserts that “teachers resort to the L1 despite their best intentions and often feeling guilty for straying from the L2 path” (p. 405).

The motivation for using the L1 in language instruction ranges from the perceived need to accommodate students in their native tongue (Chavez, 2006) to offering explanations of L2 concepts that do not exist in the L1 (Duff & Polio, 1990; Kim & Elder, 2008). In fact, many of the triggers of instructor L1 use cited in L2 research tend to overlap. Instructors are documented to have utilized the L1 in order to manage or discipline a class (Duff & Polio, 1990; Kim & Elder, 2008; Macaro, 2001; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002), provide instructions or explanations (Kim & Elder, 2008; Macaro, 2001; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002), explain grammar (Duff & Polio, 1990; Kim & Elder, 2008), motivate students to use the L2 (Kim & Elder, 2008; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002), accommodate students in mixed-ability classes (Duff & Polio, 1990;
Kim & Elder, 2008), translate, comment on student work and progress (Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002), conserve time (Duff & Polio, 1990), and discuss the target culture (Kim & Elder, 2008). While claims exist suggesting that an *excessive* amount of L1 teacher talk may also heighten student L1 use (Macaro, 2001), the prevalence of *some* L1 teacher talk is not necessarily correlated with higher levels of student L1 use or detrimental effects on language acquisition. In fact, Chavez (2006) proposes that quite the opposite may be true. In a study of three foreign language German classes at an American university, the students producing the highest amount of L1 utterances were instructed not by the teacher with the highest rate of L1 communication, but rather, by the teacher observed to have the lowest rate of L1 communication in class.

**Instructor Use of the L2**

Instructor use of the learners’ L1 is typically recommended only in the rare instance that all other means of instruction have failed (Ruiz-Funes, 2002). Thus, it is only natural that instructors feel compelled to continuously communicate through the L2. This compulsion is further impacted by the professional sentiment that teachers who do not communicate primarily through the L2 are devaluing the importance of language learning for their students (Crichton, 2009). Thus, as expected, the percentages of L2 teacher talk are equally as diverse as those for the L1. Kim and Elder (2008) report percentages of instructor L2 use ranging from 23% to 88% in secondary schools in New Zealand. Similarly, Duff and Polio (1990) report that more than 50% of the teachers they observed used the L2 less than 90% of the time.

In contrast, other studies have noted higher and more consistent percentages of instructor L2 use, with students reporting percentages of instructor L2 use at 80-100%
Comparable to findings of instructor use of the L1, student perceptions about L2 teacher talk may also lack accuracy. According to Levine (2003), while 60% of students surveyed reported 80-100% instructor use of the L2, only 44% of the instructors surveyed reported the same percentages of usage.

The amount of L2 used by instructors is significantly influenced by existing school and departmental policies (Duff & Polio, 1990). The age and proficiency level of students is also a factor, as instructors typically communicate through the L2 more often with older, more proficient language learners (Lucas & Katz, 1994). Carless (2008) reports that in some ESL contexts in Hong Kong, where the majority of students rarely speak in class, students depend on significant amounts of L2 input from their instructors, whereas other mixed-ability learning contexts have demonstrated to inhibit the use of the L2 (Kim & Elder, 2008). L2 teacher talk evidently varies among contexts, age and proficiency levels. And, while the percentages represented differ, it is apparent that students adapt as necessary, as do their instructors (Duff & Polio, 1990).

**Student Use of the L1**

All language learners are likely to communicate through the L1 at some point during the language learning process. However, the rate at which the L1 is used by language learners fluctuates. During class activities student L1 use can average anywhere from 0-100%. With that said, not all students’ use of the L1 is off-task (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Levine (2003) reveals that only *after* the completion of assigned group activities did almost 60% of the students in his study change to L1 communication, 60-100% of the time. Naturally, a large majority of students prefer to communicate through the L1 with their peers (Levine, 2003), though according to Scott and De la Fuenté (2008), even
while language learners appear to be using the L2 in class activities, they are most likely lapsing into the L1 (Auerbach, 1993). As for student L1 interaction with instructors, some research has questioned the possibility of genuine L2 communication between instructor and student (Carless, 2008).

The specific demands of class activities, task types and proficiency levels of learners all contribute to the amount of L1 communication used by language learners, as well as the contexts in which the L1 is used (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Studies have documented students availing of the L1 more when working in peer groups (Lucas & Katz, 1994) and throughout longer periods of instruction (Macaro, 2001). In addition, students appear to use higher levels of the L1 for task management (e.g., division of labour, refocusing attention, guiding, planning, developing strategies) (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Thoms, Liao, & Szustak, 2005); negotiating meaning (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar Garcia Mayo, 2009; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Lucas and Katz, 1994; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003); vocalized intrapersonal speech, or private speech (e.g., off-task behaviour, expressing frustration, disagreement or praise) (Scott & De la Fuenté, 2008); interpersonal interaction; and focusing attention (e.g., searching for vocabulary, retrieving grammar) (Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Thoms et al., 2005).

**Student Use of the L2**

Perhaps the lowest proportion of L2 communication in the language classroom is that used by students with their peers; a total that is rivaled only by the amount of L2 used by students with their instructors. A mere 17% of students surveyed by Levine (2003) reported using the L2 in conversations with their instructors 80-100% of the time.
The rate of student L2 use is documented to be higher among more experienced L2 groups and those who are classified as high achievers (Levine, 2003); although other studies have shown greater L2 use in lower grades (Lucas & Katz, 1994). Anton and DiCamilla (1998) credit the difficulty level of assigned tasks with determining whether students use the L2, as tasks requiring lower-level cognitive processes are typically performed directly in the L2. On the other end of the spectrum however, are those learners who prefer L2 communication. Such students consistently employ the L2 as a means of conserving time and taking full advantage of their L2 learning opportunity (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

**Impact of Prohibiting Use of the Native Language**

The impact of removing the use of the learners’ native language from L2 learning is thought to be two-fold: Research has established both beneficial and damaging effects of prohibiting the use of the L1 (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Auerbach, 1993; Brock-Utne, 2007; Reeder, Buntain, & Takakuwa, 1999; Scott & De la Fuenté, 2008). However, the real question is: Which effects outweigh the other? Are the benefits of prohibiting the use of the L1 such that the action is merited? Or, are the damaging effects of a ban on L1 such that the very enforcement of it is truly unwarranted?

**Noteworthy Benefits**

Requiring students to use only the L2 in the language classroom is a strategy implemented by various instructors in an attempt to provide optimal exposure to and training in the L2. Students learning in an L2-rich language context gain a greater sense of the unpredictable nature of the L2, experience real language, and develop their own language system (Macaro, 2001). Reeder, Buntain and Takakuwa (1999) maintain that an
increase in L2 use from 50-80% actually rendered somewhat stronger performances in
descriptive writing in the L2. Furthermore, the same study demonstrates higher levels of
performance in areas of descriptive and narrative writing with the intensified L2
approach.

**Negative Implications**

Evidently, many facets of the language learning process are affected by the
complete removal of the L1 as a means of communication. Because L2 learners rarely
possess a high level of L2 expertise, prohibiting the use of the only language they may
exercise proficiently can have detrimental effects. In fact, research has revealed negative
effects of prohibiting the L1 in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and
interpersonal relationships (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Auerbach, 1993; Brock-Utne,
2007; Reeder et al., 1999; Scott & De la Fuenté, 2008).

In addition, Anton and DiCamilla (1998) suggest that removing the L1 “removes,
in effect, two powerful tools for learning: the L1 and effective collaboration”
(Conclusion, ¶2); a claim reiterated in a study conducted by Scott and De la Fuenté
(2008), where the test group required to use the L2 in a collaborative task “exhibited
fragmented interaction and little evidence of collaboration” (p.100). Without the
availability of the L1 for support, students cannot communicate their needs to others.
Consequently, students get lost in the content, feel overwhelmed, and suffer tremendous
blows to their self-esteem (Auerbach, 1993). How can students possibly experience
success if they do not comprehend the only language of communication used within the
class? With test scores and confidence levels dropping, students may very well
experience an unnecessary sense of failure (Auerbach, 1993; Brock-Utne, 2007).
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Constructive Uses of the L1

Informed instruction.

“Rather than the L1 creeping in as a guilt-making necessity, it can be deliberately and systematically used in the classroom” (Cook, 2001b, 418). Using the L1 to the advantage of the learner is a concept that has been debated in L2 research; a concept that many educators are reluctant to implement. School or district policies prescribing that the L2 is to be the language of instruction frequently intimidate teachers, making them feel guilty for even the smallest lapse into the L1, and forcing them to choose between policy and best practice. The L1 can instead be implemented as an effective learning tool.

Researchers have suggested several methods of employing the L1 into instruction: (1) teach students to use L1-friendly learning strategies such as code-switching, translation (Cook, 2001a, 2001b; Rolin-Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002), contrasting L1 and L2 forms (Cook, 2001a), and circumlocution (Schweers, 1999); (2) teach and reinforce L2 language structures using the L1 to explain complex structures (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001b; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008), convey meaning (Lucas & Katz, 1994), or even as a short cut to instruction (Cook, 2001a); (3) seek clarification through the L1 by checking student comprehension and checking for sense (Atkinson, 1987; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Schweers, 1999); (4) employ the L1 to assist in task and classroom management (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001b; Schweers, 1999); (5) encourage L1 use in peer interactions to carry out tasks and to create a comfortable learning atmosphere (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001b; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Schweers, 1999); (6) engage students as teachers in pairs or groups (Cook, 2001a; Lucas & Katz, 1994); and (7) test with the L1.
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(Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001a; Schweers, 1999).

**Student-friendly approaches to L1 use.**

Research also suggests implementing the L1 as a supportive tool to engage students and assist in the language learning process (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar García Mayo, 2009; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Auerbach, 1993; Carless, 2008; Cook, 2001b; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Thoms et al., 2005). Experts have found student use of the L1 to be particularly valuable in three areas: (1) negotiating meaning and translating vocabulary, (2) acquiring and exercising grammar rules, and (3) student collaboration. Student use of the L1 to decode and interpret L2 vocabulary is an effective strategy; the value of which is not to be underestimated (Auerbach, 1993). In fact, student translation in the L1 can assist in the comprehension and memorization of L2 vocabulary (Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Similarly, students can benefit from using the L1 to clarify and communicate grammar points, especially when working in groups (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

Studies show that students benefit most from using the L1 in peer interactions. For instance, the L1 can be used collaboratively to create a social space that enables learners to complete tasks together (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). This is an especially useful tool in contexts where learners do not all share a common L1 or learners have a low level of L2 proficiency; students can be grouped by shared L1s and guide each other through tasks that would be impossible to complete otherwise (Alegria de la Colina & Del Pilar García Mayo, 2009; Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Students can also use the L1 to facilitate task management: locating information, moving the task along (Thoms et al., 2005), developing strategies, maintaining focus (Anton &
DiCamilla, 1998; Thoms et al., 2005), and determining roles (Cook, 2001b).

**Maximizing L2 Use**

Although much of the present discussion has been about whether instructors should promote or deny the role of the L1 in language education, the value of L2 input in L2 education cannot be denied. Thus, instructional principles and teaching methods notwithstanding, various methods of maximizing L2 use have been proposed. First, instructors can offer encouragement to learners and perform motivating tasks (Carless, 2008; Crichton, 2009; Duff & Polio, 1990). Appointing language monitors, placing recording devices near groups, and diminishing levels of nervousness and intimidation (Carless, 2008) places students at ease and provides them with the appropriate positive language in the L2 to later use in conversation (Crichton, 2009). Reward systems can also provide the necessary motivation to inspire students to communicate in the L2 (Carless, 2008). Additionally, enlisting the use of gestures, diagrams, pictures, and other visual aids reduce the need to lapse into the L1 for the purposes of translation and clarification (Duff & Polio, 1990; Terrell, 1977), as well as help create a positive and comfortable learning atmosphere.

In addition to a positive learning environment, students also require a certain level of sensitivity regarding their capabilities in the L2. When students engage in conversations at their own linguistic level, they experience less stress, and they are more likely to continue to produce language in the L2 (Crichton, 2009). Modifying language is a technique that can assist students in their use of the L2, without burdening them with an assortment of unknown words and phrases. Repeating phrases, using simple sentence and word structures (Duff & Polio, 1990; Ruiz-Funes, 2002), slowing speech, paraphrasing in
the L2, and making use of commonly used expressions will give students the confidence they need to perform in the L2 (Duff & Polio, 1990). After all, one cannot expect learners to perform in a language they do not understand, nor are capable of using (Carless, 2008). Thus, if the teaching goal is to reach a maximum use of L2, then logic dictates that the L2 must become “the medium as well as the object of instruction” (Ellis, 2005, p. 8); an objective that cannot be achieved without the interest and comprehension of the learner.

**Conclusion**

A true compromise on the use of the L1 in L2 education does not exist in the literature. Careful analysis of L2 research has revealed that while on one side of the debate the L1 and L2 are both embraced, on the other side the L1 is avoided and the L2 is promoted: The latter being the case in French education in Newfoundland and Labrador. Regrettably, while research is presently debating the value of the L1 in L2 instruction, the documents by which teachers guide their instruction do not take this debate into consideration.

Key arguments emerging from the literature that promote use of the L1 in L2 education include benefits ranging from the semantic level to the linguistic, psychological, cognitive, and social. In addition, a positive correlation has been determined between the use of the L1 and higher levels of motivation, as well as lower affective factors. The prevailing contention is that recognizing and accepting the inevitable influence of one’s L1 on acquiring one’s L2 is an essential foundation to L2 learning. Conversely, arguments in support of an L2-rich approach that limits or prohibits use of the L1 counter the abovementioned claims. The counterclaims assert that the success of language acquisition depends on continuous L2-rich input, thereby denouncing
use of the L1. Some evidence has been provided demonstrating that confidence levels, and ultimately, motivation levels tend to diminish with insufficient L2 exposure. The final argument set forth by proponents of an L2-rich approach relates to the influence of the L1 on L2 acquisition. The latter argument claims that the influence of the L1 is not a factor in L2 acquisition for the simple reason that one acquires an L2 similarly as one acquires an L1; a condition under which there is no presence (or influence) of another language.

Research has revealed various contexts in which the L1 and L2 are being employed by instructors and students; many of which contradict findings represented in both the literature and the universal philosophies of second and foreign language education. While it is perhaps no surprise that the amount of student use of the L2 is minimal, especially among peers, what is perhaps even more surprising is the broad range of instructor use of the L2. Clearly, there are individual differences among instructor and student use of the L1 and L2, but the fact that so much L1 is being used in L2 education calls into question whether research findings actually play a role in influencing an instructor’s decision to allow student use of and further, employ the L1 in L2 instruction. True, L2 research presents findings both supporting and denying the role of the L1 in L2 education. However, the prevailing beliefs of the very documents meant to influence a teacher’s practice in actuality do not appear to have an effect; as such documents generally explicitly require an exclusive L2 approach to L2 education.

Most studies concur that an absolute ban on the L1 is not desired; in spite of the numerous arguments recorded in favour of an L2-rich learning environment. An extremely limited or perhaps minimal use of the L1 appears to be most accepted in L2
research. Nonetheless, a prohibition on L1 use has been cited to affect student progress and achievement in all areas of development: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Additionally, without the support of one’s native language one will suffer the inability to communicate and experience a loss of confidence. Any conditions that produce an inability to communicate in the L2 undermine the very purpose of L2 education. Thus, it is the contention of this paper that the damaging effects of banning the use of the L1 greatly outweigh the proposed benefits.

Regardless of the teaching practices employed or arguments put forward in the research, several useful applications and contexts for L1 use have been recorded in L2 research: strategy work, reinforcement of language (L2) content, clarification, classroom management, collaborative work and interactions, and testing. Likewise, methods of promoting L2 use have been proposed: encouragement, motivation, gestures, visual aids, positive learning environments, sensitivity to individual capabilities, and modified use of language. Perhaps it is through employing all or some of the aforementioned strategies that will ultimately lead instructors to develop an effective model of L2 teaching.

As evidenced in this paper, the exact role of one’s native language in L2 education is yet to be determined: The undeniable significance of the L2 is widely presented in the research, whereas an agreement on the potential yielded from the use of the L1 has not been reached thus far. Teaching practice is presently guided by curriculum documents and school, district and departmental policies, all of which support an extremely limited or all-out ban on L1 use in the L2 classroom. Thus, while research is attempting to show that there is in fact a place for the L1 in L2 learning, teachers’ hands are in fact tied. Even if instructors believe that the L1 can be used effectively in the L2
classroom, the policies and frameworks from which they guide their practice prohibit them from implementing any methods that deviate from standard policy.

Therefore, it is the recommendation of this paper that more energy be spent examining the L1 at work in the context of L2 learning. Further exploration of the role of the L1 in L2 education will provide a more comprehensive and explicit set of guidelines by which instructors may guide their practice. If indeed the findings are empirically sound and support a role for the L1 in L2 education, then it is up to schools, districts and departments to formulate policies that reflect such research findings. Only then will L2 teachers be able to use the L1 without feelings of guilt and fears of acting unprofessionally weighing them down for the occasional lapse into the L1. In the meantime, teachers are neither discouraged nor encouraged to post a ban on L1 use in the L2 classroom. Rather, the author encourages L2 instructors to recognize that students may naturally resort to their native language throughout the language learning process, and to keep an open mind to the possibility of occasionally employing the L1 as an educational tool. It is however the final decision of the instructor, or in many cases, school district and departmental policies, as to whether to train students to employ the L1 as a tool or to banish it entirely.
References


doi:10.1080/07908310802287574


