

The Necessities for Using the Learners' L1 in the EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The importance of use of L1 (First Language, or mother tongue) in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom has long been an extensively studied issue in L2 (Second Language) teaching, and the presence of L1 in the EFL classroom is not new in the L2 teaching and learning history. Thus the correlation between L1 and L2 is indisputable. Accordingly, the use of L1 demands appropriate consideration not only because of its immediate and salient effect in EFL classrooms but also because of its significance of helping the learners sift information and improve efficiency in L2 learning.

Keywords: *EFL classrooms, L1, L2, Different perspectives, Monolingual approach, Necessity for the use of L1 in EFL classrooms.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The necessities for the use of L1 in the EFL classroom have long been an extensively studied issue in L2 teaching and learning field. According to Anega (2012), the application of L1 in EFL classroom could not be completely avoided and it could also be an inseparable element of L2 teaching and learning in the EFL context. Thus the rationale for the discussion about the use of L1 in L2 teaching and learning in English class is trying to explore how L1 impacts L2 teaching and learning in EFL classrooms from two different perspectives. As is examined by Anega (2012), the correlation between L1 and L2 is indisputable hence the use of L1 demands appropriate consideration not only because of its immediate and salient effect in EFL classrooms but also because of its significance of helping the learners sift information in L2 learning as best as they can and the effectiveness of classroom management which includes discipline, class organization and task setting. As Anega (2012) weighs up the importance of the role of L1 in English classroom, the key purpose, as the essential component of L2 learning, is how to make use of L1 in EFL classroom and to make it a more constructive role to facilitate and support English teaching in class. Therefore, in this essay, the general controversy of this issue will be presented,

including the reason for advocating the use of L1 in EFL class and the reason for avoiding the use of L1 in EFL class. Namely, the different perspectives on L1 in L2 teaching and learning will be illustrated in the first part. And in the following part, there will be some illustrations about both the advantages and disadvantages of using L1 in EFL classrooms with some practical examples. In the part of discussion, according to some previous teaching experience, the current situation of EFL in the specific teaching context and the teacher and student's attitudes towards the use of L1 in English class will be presented and analyzed in order to show awareness of using L1 in English teaching in some authentic context and give in-depth insight into L1 use in L2 teaching and learning. Finally, in the conclusion part, this essay is supposed to emphasize on the appropriate rationality and necessity for the use of L1 in EFL classrooms and the further reflection on how to make English language teaching to its maximum efficiency possible, especially in colleges of China.

2. THE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON L1 IN L2 TEACHING AND LEARNING

2.1 *The Controversial Arguments About the Use of L1 in EFL Classrooms*

The issue of whether or not to use L1 in an EFL classroom has long been controversially argued. There are discussions and debates over this issue among linguists and language teachers that some of them vote for the positive use of L1 in EFL class while others firmly deny the relevance of mother tongue in foreign or second language learning class. Although there have been many arguments about the theme, the presence of L1 in the EFL classroom is not new in the history of L2 teaching and learning (Anega, 2012). Using L1 in EFL classrooms has gone through totally different opposed views (Bran, 2015).

According to Bran (2015), there are many arguments in favor of or against using L1 while teaching English or other foreign language. Those who are in favor of using L1 in EFL classrooms claim L1 in classrooms can mainly bring advantages rather disadvantages. Anega (2012) believes that language learners' mother tongue is an indispensable element of foreign language learning and it is hardly possible to make effective language teaching and learning without language learners' L1.

On the other hand, those who are against using L1 in English teaching classrooms claim that in the process of acquiring L2 the learners' mother tongue should be minimized (Alshehri, 2017). Since the end of 18th century, there have been a number of English teaching methods, having adopted monolingual approach (Cook, 2001), which is the typical representatives of avoiding using L1 in EFL classrooms. Monolingual approach is opposed to the use of L1 in L2 teaching and learning class. As is supported by Cook (2001) and Krashen (1982), the monolingual approach discourages the use of learners' mother tongue because the monolingual theories are considered "more modern and student oriented" (Bran, 2015, p.176). According to Bran, "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." (ibid.).

2.2 *The Correlation of L1 and L2 — Language Acquisition from Different Perspectives*

As Lightbrown & Spada (2013) describe, "language acquisition is one of the most impressive and fascinating aspects of human development" (p.5). Language development from infancy through early school years has been the evidence that adults have abundant knowledge of what they learnt since their childhood in the early language development (Lightbrown & Sapada, 2013). The key question, however, is about how this development takes place. Accordingly, there are two main theoretical positions have been provided as the explanation for the language development in this essay, which are "behaviourist and innatist perspectives" (ibid., p.15).

From the behaviourist perspective, the behaviourists hold that imitation and practice are the primary processes in language development. Namely, children imitate the language which is produced around them and they would probably keep imitating and practicing those sounds and patterns until they "formed habits of correct language use" (ibid., p.15), which could be explained as "habit formation"(ibid., p. 104). According to Krashen's theory of second language acquisition, when learning foreign languages, he argues that learners mainly follow the same path or use the same method as they do when they acquire their L1(Krashen, 1982). Furthermore, as Brown (1994) states, language acquisition is a subconscious activity thus it can only be achieved by interacting through L2. These views are the representatives of monolingual approach, which maximize L2 use in the classroom and are totally against the use of L1 in SLA (second language acquisition). On the contrary, as Du (2016) claims, although from behaviourist perspective, all language learning can be viewed as a set of language habits, like any other sort of leaning behavior, "the process of L2 learning is very different from that of L1 learning"(p.16). As Mitchell & Myles (2004) report, when learning a L1 as learners' mother tongue, the learning process is comparatively easy, because when learning L1 what the learners have to do is learning a new set of language habits to respond to the stimulus in the language environment while learning L2, the learners have to, however, replace the already-established responses and habits with a set of new ones. Therefore, from the recent L2 acquisition research and theories, L1 has "a two-side role" in L2 learning (Du, 2016, p.15). Behaviourist learning

theory also believes the old formation of learning habits will unavoidably have impacts on the process of learning new languages, both positive and negative (ibid.)

From the innatist perspective, "Chomsky argued that innate knowledge of the principles of Universal Grammar (UG) permits all children to acquire language of their environment during a critical period of their development" (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013, p.104). Still as Lightbrown & Spada explain, L2 learners would eventually know more about the language than "they could reasonably have learned if they had to depend entirely on the input they are exposed to" (ibid., p.105). Accordingly, the knowledge of UG must be available to learners, both L1 and L2 and one cannot absolutely exclude "the possibility that the distinction shown by the L2 learners was in some way based on L1 grammar" (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013; White, 2003, p. 35).

According to Lightbrown & Spada (2013) and Anega (2012), the new knowledge is gained on the basis of the previously acquired knowledge. It would be quite likely that L2 learners make use of what they have already known, including previously learned language. Although sometimes they might be unwilling to transfer some L1 pattern, L1 influence may be inevitable, which leads learners to find similarities that they might not be able to see at earlier language learning stage. Based on the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH), "errors were assumed to be the results of transfer from learners' first language", but not all the language errors that L2 learners make can be attributed to first language transfer alone (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013, p.42). Moreover, other argument like "the main impediment to learning was interference from prior knowledge" (Ellis, 1994, p.299), "no theory of L2 acquisition is complete without an account of L1 transfer" (ibid., p.341). Therefore, the L1 influence on target language could be quite subtle and complicated process thus the errors that L2 learners make could not be predicted and defined by a simple comparison of their L1 and L2 (Senior, 2006; Lightbrown & Spada, 2013).

2.3 The Advantages of Using L1 in the EFL Classrooms

It might be unlikely that L2 learners totally have no tendency to use their L1 in EFL classrooms especially when there is not any other nationality. Teachers could require students to speak English in class when they answer questions and have

discussions but it may be strange and unnatural that L2 learners do not have the tendency to use their mother tongue during breaks or when they have some private talks to deal with their interpersonal relations (Bran, 2015). According to the present study by Alshehri (2017), most of the students use L1 in EFL classrooms to some extent and the teachers also use their shared L1 for translating new vocabulary, preparing for tasks and scaffolding L2 communication in language learning situation. As Alshehri (2017) claims, L1 and L2 connection by itself could not be viewed as an impediment to language learning but should be taken as a beneficial element in language learning class because appropriate use of L1 in EFL classrooms could help reduce learners' anxiety (Bran, 2015; Du, 2016). As is stated by Bran (2015), L2 learners of low proficiency or beginners may not be willing to speak English in class because they feel it too difficult and challenging to speak English as they have not acquired enough knowledge from this language so they might feel nervous and anxious in English class. Therefore, beginners or young learners need moderate L1 input to understand teachers' instructions, difficult concepts as well as guidance and rules related to their English class. Hence it is quite necessary for teachers to find out a method to reduce learners' worries and anxieties and then encourage them to feel at ease in English class as the use of L1 can help create a more cohesive and relaxed classroom atmosphere (Alshehri, 2017).

Using L1 in EFL classrooms could make learning more efficient in class (Bran, 2015; Anega, 2012). As Du (2016) believes, "the main responsibility for L2 teachers in their teaching is simply to provide sufficient comprehensible L2 input" (p. 19) thus within so limited class time, the effective language teaching, as Cook (2001) regards, may "fall back to the first language as one of the overall types of communication strategies" (p. 107). For instance, when the teacher need to explain some very difficult grammar and concepts or new words which can be found counterparts in students' L1, students may understand better and faster if the teacher tries to translate them instead of conveying the meanings with other kind of explanation in L2. In brief, EFL teachers could use L1 "to some extent to serve certain pedagogical functions" (Alshehri, 2017, p.20).

The use of L1 in EFL classrooms also contributes to the effectiveness of class management, which includes class discipline, class organization and task setting. According to Bran

(2015), in an EFL classroom, teachers would first make sure that students would keep good disciplines in class in order to increase the efficiency of class thus the related rules of English class would be stated first thus teachers must make very clear points to students that they prefer to use L1 as the aid. And about the task setting, the teacher first give instructions in English, then he or she could translate the key words of his or her talk then he or she repeats in English, which would help students notice the language structure used in class, reducing teacher's talking time. In this way, the use of L1 helps facilitate a better understanding of the task in class (Bran, 2015). In sum, L1 can be used as a teaching and learning aid in EFL classrooms.

2.4 *The Disadvantages of Using L1 in the EFL Classrooms*

EFL teachers do use L1 in class to perform a series of functions but there may be some real drawbacks if L1 is not properly used in class. Once a teacher uses L1 to give students instructions, there may be a risk that the teacher might carry on lecturing with L1, which would make students less willing to communicate in L2 because their shared L1 makes them much more relaxed and it is easier to communicate with both teacher and classmates hence overuse of L1 will cause learners' lack of communicative competence (Bran, 2015; Anega, 2012).

The use of L1 in EFL classroom can only be "a short-term solution to meet the immediate needs of learners of L2 in communication before they acquire sufficient L2 competence" (Du, 2016, p.18), because it indeed will cause some L1 interference errors in L2 learning process (Anega, 2012). Furthermore, some still believe that the drawbacks of "falling back on the L1 outweighed the advantages in the long run" (Du, 2016, p.19). As Bran (2015) and Anega, (2012) described, the use of L1 in class should be avoided because that would cause boredom in class. Teachers who used L1 in English class would be regarded as weak teachers because they might not be able to explain questions or give a complete lecture in English themselves. In addition, it is said the use of L1 could be the obstacle of communication and fluency in L2 speaking, which makes students feel bored and dull and even give them a misconception of L2 learning.

3. DISCUSSION ABOUT THE NECESSITIES FOR THE USE OF L1 IN EFL CLASSROOMS OF CHINA

3.1 *The Specific Working Context and the Aim of L2 Teaching in this Context*

According to the previous teaching experience, it would be voted for the positive use of L1 in EFL classrooms, especially in colleges of China. The specific context refers to the L2 Learners mainly in their first or second year in colleges of a southwest city in China. L2 learners are non English major students who studied different subjects as their majors. They mainly majored in engineering, architecture, accounting and Economics. For all the non English major students, college English is a compulsory course which they must take to gain credits in the first two years of college. As college students in different majors in China, students' English proficiency can vary quite a lot. For those who have very low proficiency in English, L1 exclusion may be unnecessary, especially for most majors in engineering and architecture who have comparatively less language skills and even lower motivation than those economics majors and accounting majors. As Du (2016) reported, many researchers saw the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition and there are indeed other factors which would also have influence on L2 learning such as motivation, anxiety about making mistakes and learners' learning environment. Thus banning the use of L1 in EFL classrooms would evidently reduce class efficiency because once students have better understanding of the teacher's teaching aims and contents in class, clearer rules for class activities, more fluent communication with teacher and classmates in English class, they will become more concentrated, more confident and even more interested in L2 learning in class. In addition, properly using the shared L1 also helps teachers build up rapport with students, especially in colleges because students are all adults and they may be happier to have a harmonious relationship with their teachers from a socio-cultural respect (Alshehri, 2017). Therefore, since it may be impossible to avoid L1 interference, as an EFL teacher in China, with the aim of maximizing the L2 exposure to the students by using moderate L1 as teaching aid in EFL classrooms to help students feel relaxed and less worried in English class, it is our duty to carefully consider the time and amount

of using L1 properly in English class thus L1 should never be overused in college English class.

3.2 The Stance on the Use of L1 in EFL Classrooms

As is mentioned above, the purpose of this essay would show my stance on the proper use of L1 in EFL classrooms. I will certainly show my positive vote for using L1 in second language learning class. As an EFL teacher who used to teach in college of China, I firmly believe that English must be the main language used in English class. As is stated above, the process of SLA is conscious, which is different from children's picking up their mother tongue since they were born although there are some similarities. According to behaviourists' view (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013) children basically pick up their mother tongue by imitation and practice as the primary processes in language development, which is a subconscious process while L2 learners acquire a new language by setting up a set of new rules and habits to replace their previously acquired language habits formation, which is conscious. According to Lightbrown & Spada (2013) and Anega (2012), the new knowledge is gained on the basis of the earlier gained knowledge. It would be possible that L2 learners make use of what they have already known, including previously learned language to achieve a new language. Therefore, using L1 translation or giving out key word in students' mother tongue as class instructions or explanation for the difficult concepts or even correction of some obvious errors made by the students might be a teaching method in college English class especially when the language learners have comparatively low language proficiency. There would be L1 interference on L2 learning indeed but as long as we use L1 properly the L1 impacts on L2 would mostly be in positive ways. For example, when students inevitably make comparison between L1 and L2 in some language issue, the language teacher might expect what problem they would think about and what sort of mistakes they would probably make. Therefore the language teacher could use a little hint by L1 to remind the students of their misunderstanding or potential mistakes they would make. A case in point is mispronunciation of some English vowels. For instance, there are some vowels like /i:/, /æ/ and diphthong/ai/ that are quite likely to muddle their pronunciations with their similar so-called "counterparts" in Chinese (in fact they are not) such as "yi", "ai", " (in Chinese characters as "衣", and "

爰", "安"). Hence teachers could make use of L1 to distinguish their pronunciations for the students, especially the way how to pronounce in different languages. The same method could be used in vague vocabulary (e.g. very slight and subtle distinctions among some synonyms) and difficult grammar explanation like subjunctive mood which is difficult to handle for students. In brief, L1 could be made proper use of in L2 class but make sure when, why and how to use it in order to make it appropriate for L2 achievement by avoiding unlimited use of L1 and trying best to raise our awareness of the empirical benefits of the use of L1 in EFL classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

In the light of the above mentioned discussion, it can be concluded that as EFL teachers, the most significant questions we should ask ourselves and further explore may not be whether we should use L1 or not in EFL classrooms, but when and how much we should use L1 as teaching aid to assist L2 learning for students. As EFL teachers we should make efforts to fill the gaps with what we refer to by using L1 to help students better the process of L2 learning. In addition, as EFL teachers we have the responsibilities to raise our awareness of making best use of L1 properly. Learning a foreign language is, however, a dynamic process mainly based on learners' previously acquired language knowledge so the most essential resource students can bring into their L2 learning is their currently existed L1 knowledge thus according to the previous discussion about the correlation between L1 and L2, the L1 interference on L2 teaching and learning is indisputable. Therefore, in EFL classrooms, the use of L1 is of great necessity for making the whole process of second language learning fluent and relaxing but L1 and L2 input should be balanced. L1 should not be overused with the aim of having ample L2 exposure to the students and creating rich language environment for the students in EFL classrooms. Accordingly, as EFL teachers, we should make sure that we make efforts to create safe context for L2 learners to achieve a new language.

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