

## Mother Tongue in the EFL Classroom

Amirabbas Ghorbani

(Islamic Azad University, Qazvin Branch, Iran)

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### Abstract

The use of students' mother tongue (MT/L1) in the second/foreign language classroom has been debated in language teaching theory and practice for many decades. Most language teaching methods advocate the use of the target language (TL) in the classroom. However, recent research has elevated the role of L1 in the classroom. This paper illustrates traces of the mother tongue in past and present debates to provide an overall picture of the changes and help researchers identify the gaps in this area.

### Introduction

Tracing back the use of L1 in language classroom will take us to the history of language teaching when the early approaches emphasized on reading texts and translating them to students' mother tongue. Since then, there have been fundamental changes in psychology of learning, linguistic and other language related educational fields which have affected the strategies employed in the language classroom to maximize the outcomes. Anecdotal evidence suggests an increasing trend towards banning the use of L1 in the classroom; however several studies in the last decade have indicated a shift in approach. This paper aims to highlight the main areas of the present and past debates concerning the use of L1 in the classroom and provide an overall picture of the changes through out the time. Identifying the movements affecting this issue will enable the researchers to find the gaps in their specialized area of interest.

### The story of L1 in the classroom

L1 or mother tongue in the classroom has been studied from different perspectives. Here we will review the debates concerning this issue in two main periods 1) the age of methods 2) the era beyond methods.

### *The position of L1 among language teaching methods*

L1 has always been considered as one of the language classroom factors which must be taken care of carefully. Some approaches have focused on the use of L1 as the main device for learning a new language (Grammar Translation Method/GTM), and some have prevented the use of L1 in the process of language teaching (Direct Method/DM). Larsen-Freeman (2003) has summarized the “dynamics of methodological changes” as you can see in table 1. Larsen-Freeman has divided the changes in three main eras. The first one starts with GTM in the 1950s and ends with the audio-lingual approach in the 1960s when scholars challenge the habit formation views of behaviorist psychology. The second period which is called a period of methodological diversity is characterized by the emergence of innovative methods challenging the past views and practices during 1970s and 1980s. The notion of communicative competence introduced in late 1980s started the third period and the new communicative approach “reunified the field”, although it got various implementations from place to place. The innovations still continued but they mainly focused on the process of learning. The following table summarizes the position of L1 among the language teaching methods.

As the table indicates, the use of L1 has altered in the course of methodological changes although it has always been there except for DM and Audio-Lingual method. A closer look at the uses of L1 in Larsen-Freeman methodology framework shows that after audio-lingualism the role of L1 has been defined in the framework of its function in the process of teaching and learning in each method. Here we are going to take a closer look. The silent way which comes directly after the prohibition era of direct method and audio-lingualism still stands on the position of banning the use of mother tongue specially for teaching the meaning of the new words which can be interpreted as the traces of Direct approaches to teaching (the main reason for using TL in the direct method is that the meaning of the new words must be learned directly), however it assigns the role of a facilitator for classroom instruction and defines L1 as a device for teaching pronunciation.

**Table 1: The position of L1 among language teaching methods**

Method	Teaching strategies	The use of L1
Grammar translation (GTM)	Exercise mental muscles by having the students translate from target language texts to native language	The meaning of the target language is made clear by translating it into the students' native language. The language that is used in the class is mostly the students' native language. (p.18)
Direct Method (DM)	Associate meaning with the target language directly by using spoken language in situations with <b>no</b> native language translation.	The students' native language should not be used in the classroom. (p.30)
Audio-Lingual (AL)	Overcome native language habits and form new TL habits by conducting oral drills and pattern practice.	Native language interferes with learning the new language so the target language must be used. (p. 47)
Silent Way (SW)	Develop inner criteria for correctness by becoming aware of how the TL works.	Meaning is made clear by perception not translation however native language can be used to give instruction and teach pronunciation it is also used in some feedback sessions. (p.67)
Suggestopedia (S)	Overcome psychological barriers by musical accompaniment, playful practice, and the arts.	Native-language translation is used to make the meaning of the dialogue clear. The teacher also uses the native language in class when necessary. As the course proceeds, the teacher uses the native language less and less. (p.83)
Community Language Learning (CLL)	Learn nondefensively as whole persons, following developmental stages.	Students' security is initially enhanced by using their native language. The purpose of L1 is to provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Directions in class and sessions during which students express their feelings and are understood are conducted in the native language. (pp. 101-102)
Total physical Response (TPR)	Listen, associate meaning with TL directly, make meaning clear through visual and actions	This method is usually introduced initially in the students' native language. After the lesson introduction, rarely would the native language be used. Meaning is made clear through body movements. (p.115)
Communicative language teaching (CLT)	Interact with others in the target language; negotiate meaning with TL directly by using information gaps, role play and games.	Judicious use of the students' native language is permitted in communicative language teaching. (p.132)

As we proceed to the next method L1 acts to “make the meaning clear” while in silent way “meaning is made clear by perception not translation”. This shift which comes along with the great changes in psychology and linguistic, challenges fundamental roots of Direct method as the first reaction against L1 in the classroom .

Paying more attention to the psychological dimension of teaching puts learners’ inner state into a primary position and the role of L1 is enhanced to help overcome psychological barriers as one of the main concerns. Creating a sense of security and bridging from familiar

to unfamiliar are the responsibilities of L1 in the classroom. In community language learning method this role has been heightened to a point that some sessions of the class can be devoted to learners to express their feelings in their native language.

After reaching this elevated position, the second shift towards limiting the use of L1 occurs in TPR. This method suggests getting meaning directly through target language and action; however L1 is considered as a tool for introducing the method.

Putting communication at the heart of language learning process makes the use of target language in the classroom as the main source of input in communicative approach. The notion of communication was first introduced in the Direct method when “ the goal of instruction became learning how to communicate” (Larsen-Freeman 2003, p.23). However by the emergence of audio-lingualism the class activities moved towards controlled structural drills which were more mechanical than communicative in nature. The need for a move to a more communicative rather than controlled and “manipulated” activities in the classroom was described in Prator’s article entitled “development of a manipulation-communication scale.”(Prator, 1965 in Celce-Murcia & McIntosh Eds. 1979) Early 1970s witnessed the moves towards a communicative approach through other innovative methods of the time as a response to Audio-Lingualism. As it was described earlier each method assigned a particular role to the use of students’ native language in the classroom. According to Table 1 the “judicious” use of L1 is permitted in communicative approach. Comparing the role of L1 in communicative approach with the previous methods reveals a difference in the terms of application. By this I mean that in the past methods L1 has a particularly defined role in the classroom for example, translating dialogues (sugestopedia), expressing feeling and enhancing security (CLL) and introducing the method (TPR) .The question here is that why the role of L1 in the classroom has not been clearly defined in CLT?

Answering the above mentioned question takes a broader look at the change of the field from a linguistic-centered approach to a communicative approach in the late 1970s and early 1980s which is the last decade of the age of methods (1960s-1980s). The changes in this period seem to be much smoother than the early rigid methodological reactions and sharp fundamental changes which we observed moving from GTM to Audio Lingual Method. This is called “an indication of methodological maturity” by Newton (1979, cited in Celce-Murcia & McIntosh, 1979). She says: “it is a hopeful sign- perhaps an indication of methodological

maturity -that the reaction to one domestic approach has not resulted in another method equally arbitrary and inflexible. Thus far, the suggestions for change have been gentle, and we have not been left with a vacuum to be filled”(p. 20). She claims that the thinking in methodology of her time is in the direction of 1) relaxation of some of the more extreme restrictions of the audio-lingual method and 2) development of techniques requiring a more active use of students’ mental power. According to Newton one proof of the relaxation of the restrictions is that “the prohibition against using the students’ native language has been considerably relaxed” (p.20). Although she limits the role of L1 as a means of giving explanation and instructions, the writer believes that the so called methodological maturity and relaxation of the restrictions resulted in undefined role of L1 in communicative approach. It seems that this is the responsibility of the teacher to decide when and how use the L1, based on the context of teaching and students need. The evidences of this fact are revealed later in the post method era and it will be fully discussed. Besides, the focus of attention in this period is mainly on communicating in target language rather than banning the use of L1 in the classroom.

Communication is the center of three other methods discussed here namely, content-based, task based and participatory approaches. “The difference between these approaches and communicative approach is a matter of their focus.... [They] do not begin with functions or indeed, any other language items. Instead, they give priority to process over predetermined linguistic content.” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 137) In terms of Howatt (1984) “they use the language to learn” rather than” learn to use the language”. Obviously here, the language is the target language. Most of the principles of TBLT seem to be the natural development of the communicative method, so there is no change in approach towards the use of L1 in the classroom.

Most recent researchers and historians of the methodologies of language teaching, emphasize on the prohibition of the use of L1 in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, significantly after the reform movement and the emergence of DM. However depending on how strong views they have toward the issue, they mention some drawbacks and benefits of the use of L1 in the classroom and they put the burden on the teachers’ shoulder to decide. Addressing the CLT era, Howatt and Widdowson (2004) assert that:

...as we have seen more than once, the basic position of ELT on this issue [using the mother tongue ] has hardly changed for a hundred years: try to avoid switching between languages, but obviously you will have to translate if you want to make sure that the learners understand what they are doing. Very reasonable and seemingly straight forward but in fact its not really a straight forward issue at all. It is a psychological complex problem and language teachers could do it with appropriate advice... (p. 259)

They also mention the renewed current interest in bilingualism which looks at the issue mainly from a sociological perspective and they believe that this trend is changing in the recent years.

*“The changing winds and shifting sands”* (borrowed from Marckward, 1972)

What was described previously covers a century from 1885 to 1985. Here we are going to investigate the trends from the mid-1980s when we can hear the first signs of change from the laments of Stern’s (1985) “the changing winds and the shifting sands”. This is a period that the search for the ideal method which was the main concern of the 1970s is questioned by a change from methods to approaches.” we did not need a method. We needed, instead to get on with the business of unifying our approach to language teaching and of designing effective tasks and techniques informed by that approach.” (Douglas Brown, 1997, in Richards & Renandya Eds., 2002, p.11) The nature of method is static but approach is much more dynamic and changes along the time. It grows as you grow older. This is what Newton (as cited in Celce-Murcia & MacIntosh, 1979) calls “methodological maturity”.

Regarding the notion of maturity, Kumaravadivelu (1992) grounds his argument for the need for an empowered teacher, although he states that “we cannot prepare teachers to tackle so many unpredictable needs, wants, and situations; we can only help them develop a capacity to generate varied and situation-specific ideas within a general framework that makes sense in terms of current pedagogical and theoretical knowledge”(p. 41). Later in his framework namely “macro strategies for foreign / second language teacher” he doesn’t mention L1 as a classroom factor. Maybe in his view it was a micro strategy for the classroom. Later we will take a closer look at his works to see how this maturity grows in the course of time. Another attempt for giving a dynamic framework within which a language teacher can follow his responsibilities was prepared by Douglas Brown (1997). He introduced 12 principles which “comprise a body of constructs which few would dispute as central to most language acquisition contexts.”(p. 12) The 10<sup>th</sup> principle of this framework is “the native language

effect” in which first he praised L1 as a system on which the target language system prediction are based and can act as a facilitator, although he highlighted the interfering effect of L1 on L2 afterwards.

### *L1 in post method pedagogy*

Tracing the early attempts toward the post method pedagogy, Kumaravadivelu (2005) focuses on Stern’s (1992) three dimensional framework .The first aspect of this model is “L1-L2 connection, concerning the use or nonuse of the first language in learning the second language” (p. 187) namely interlingual and cross lingual dimensions .These attempts which tried to skip from the constraints of the methods put L1 in the position of a main criterion for the new model of pedagogy.

Reviewing all his works and studies up to 2005 Kumaravadivelu devotes much more value to the L1 in the classroom. Analyzing different dimensions and definitions of input and intake, he redefines the role of L1 in his framework under the title of “knowledge factors”. In his word knowledge factors refer to “language knowledge and meta-language knowledge.” He states that “all adult L2 learners exposed to formal language education in their L1 inevitably bring with them not only their L1 knowledge/ability but also their own perception and expectations about language, language learning, and language use.”(p. 41) Recalling the empirical studies of Cook (1992) and Gass (1997) (cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2005) he states that L2 learners use their L1 effectively while processing L2, and the knowledge of L1 is “constantly available” in this process. Metacognitive knowledge is also “considered to be an important factor in L2 development because it encompasses the learners’ knowledge /ability not only to think about language as a system but also to make comparisons between their L1 and L2, thus facilitating the psycholinguistic process of language transfer” (p. 42).

### *English only movement and emergent bilingualism*

Besides the effect of reform movement on the use of L1 in language classroom and all methodological struggles, the 1980s witnessed profound educational debates in the united states which shows that monolingual approach to the teaching of English has its roots in “the controversy over establishing English as the official language “ of the U.S.(Gallegoes, 1994, p. 7).However the recent reports on the minority education in the U.S showed an increase in the number of two-way program which “integrate language minority and language majority students and provide content area instruction and language development in two

languages”(Christian,1996, p. 1). In her article she provides a picture of the two-way education changes between 1991 and 1994.Pointing out the goals of this program as improving bilingual proficiency she says:

Emerging results of studies of two-way immersion programs point to their effectiveness in educating nonnative- English-speaking students, their promise of expanding our nation's language resources by conserving the native language (L1) skills of minority students and developing second language (L2) skills in English-speaking students, and their hope of improving relation-ships between majority and minority groups by enhancing crosscultural understanding and appreciation (p. 1).

The most recent research and reviews show a shift towards the bilingualism as the norm of the education in the U.S. Garcia (2009) argues that this trend will be beneficial for 1) the children themselves 2) teachers and teaching 3) educational policy makers 4) parents and communities 5) the field of language education and TESOL 6) societies at large. she believes that “children’s emergent bilingualism would integrate the four aspects of language education-teaching of English to speakers of other languages(TESOL), bilingual education(BE), the teaching of the heritage language (HL) when available, and the teaching of another foreign language (FL).Teaching would then be centered on the student, and not on the profession”(p. 325). Regarding the growing importance of bilingualism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century she claims that “the language resources of the United States have never been greater, despite its insistence on being a monolingual state, the United States has perhaps the worlds most complex bilingual practices” (p. 325).

This historical account mainly concerns with minority education and bilingualism in the U.S. educational system which is beyond the scope of the present article, but it seems that the vast spread of English as the world’s lingua Franca has raised the same debates over the monolingual approach to the teaching of English in a larger global sense. The notion of “linguisticism” introduced by Skutnabb-Kangas(1988) points to the fact that reaching to higher levels of education and better jobs is determined by knowing a particular language which finally leads to unequal social and economical situations (p. 9).

Kachru (1994) refers to a similar monolingual approach in SLA research as the dominant paradigm which must be reevaluated from bi/multilingual perspectives. To do so, he examines the notions of “competence”, “fossilization”, and “native speaker” to show that they all result from “a monolingual bias in SLA research” (p. 796).There are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to challenge the monolingual principle and articulate a set of bilingual

instructional strategies “ (Cummins, 2009, p.317). Challenging this principle Macedo (2000) calls the English only movement “as a form of colonialism” (p.16).

The debates on the minority’s linguistic rights and bilingualism paved the way for a broader theory of Linguistic imperialism within which the researchers worry about L1 language and culture and they explore the effect of L1 in the process of learning L2.

### *L1 within linguistic imperialism*

Philipson (1992) advanced the skeptic view of the hegemony of the “core” towards the “periphery” by submitting his doctoral dissertation to the University of Amsterdam. In his view there are evidences that ELT is not a neutral educational field yet, it’s a social political tool for dominating the ideologies of the “core”, Anglo-American’s, over the “periphery”, third world countries. In his book “Linguistic Imperialism” he challenges main tenets of monolingual approach in ELT.

- 1) English is best taught monolingually. (The monolingual fallacy)
- 2) The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker. (The native speaker fallacy)
- 3) The earlier English is taught, the better the results. (The early start fallacy)
- 4) The more English is taught the better the results. (The maximum exposure fallacy)
- 5) If other languages are used much, the standards of English will drop. (The subtraction fallacy)(p. 185)

All the fallacies above are somewhat related to the learners’ L1 in the process of learning L2. He reviews the linguistic dogmas of the past which resulted in these fallacies and argues that there are scientific evidences that reject them all. He calls researchers like Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976, cited in Philipson, 1992), Cummins (1979, 1984, cited in Philipson, 1992) to provide the support against the fallacies. The researches mentioned here are mostly in the area of bilingualism and minority education and support the relationship between cognitive development in L1 and effective L2 learning.

Spada and Lightbown 1999 also conducted a study on 11-12 years old French students learning English as a second language in Quebec. The study revealed the influence of L1 on the developmental sequence of L2 learning .The study showed that” [learners’] judgments of grammaticality and their assumptions about how to create their own questions appear to have been con-strained by an interlanguage rule based on their L1”(p. 17). Although Ron Sheen

(2000) criticizes their work in terms of methodology and claims that the results concerning the effect of L1 is what we knew from the past research, he admits accepting the results.

Regarding EFL settings, Philipson (1992) argues that the monolingual approach to language teaching is impractical since most teachers are nonnative (p. 192).

#### *World Englishes and Nonnative teachers*

World Englishes generally is defined as new forms of English emerging in non-English speaking countries. In a broader sense it refers to “a pluralistic approach to the study of English”. It is believed that “this approach would enable each learner’s and speakers of English to reflect his or her own sociolinguistic reality rather than that of a usually distant native speaker (Jenkins, 2006, p. 173). In the recent years, accepting non standard versions of English as the reality of today’s language teaching profession has been followed by an increasing interest in the issue of NNS as language teachers (See Medgyes, 1994; Tang, 1997; Cook, 1999; Braine, 1999; Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999). The main argument for supporting this trend is the common knowledge of the first language that the teacher shares with learners. Cook (1999) asserts that this interest is not because the NNS teachers “present a more achievable model” (p. 200). The notion of multi-competent language teacher is argued to be the advantage of nonnative teachers. Researchers working on this area are concerned about the appropriateness of the teacher education programs for nonnative teachers and call for changes which can put the non native teachers of English in the “center” rather than “periphery” position by eliminating native- nonnative dichotomy as the main criterion (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999, pp. 419-428).

#### *Code-switching in the classroom*

Code-switching has been a topic of research for linguists, educationalists, language researchers and psychologist and even the brain specialists who work on the different functions of human brain. Within the language classroom the issue of code-switching is viewed from an educational point of view and it is directly linked to the use of mother tongue in the classroom when the learners share the same L1. Edmonson (2004) makes a distinction between code-switching as a general term and code-switching in the classroom and calls the latter a special case of the earlier (pp. 155-159).

By growing the notion of communication in the language teaching profession, there has been a shift towards group activities rather than individual practices. Long and Porter (1985) review the five pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in the classroom: a) increasing the quantity of language input b) students' talk quality improvement c) instruction individualizing d) positive classroom atmosphere creation e) students' motivation improvement, besides the previous research arguments they also provide a psycholinguistic rationale to the benefits of group work in the classroom (pp. 207-225).

From a practical perspective, the first concern of the teachers who use group activities in their classes is the shift from TL to L1. They always complain that their students resort in their L1 and in large classes it is really difficult to maintain TL use through out the class time.

According to Martin-Jones (1995) the early research studied code-switching from an educational point of view whereas the more recent research has focused on applying discourse analysis, pragmatics and ethnography principles. (Edmonson, 2004; Macaro, 2001; Cook, 2002). Two main functions have been reported for code switching a) discourse related functions b) participant related functions (Auer 1985, 1998 in Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain, 2005, p. 235). Analyzing code switching in a German content-based classroom Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain (2005) conclude that the function of code switching in the classroom which was previously argued to be just participant related can also be discourse related which was identified as the function of non institutional code switching of bilinguals before. In other words, their research revealed that code switching in the classroom has the elements of code switching in out of the classroom environment. Hancock (1997) explored different layers of code-switching and claimed that:

For the teacher who is worried about the quality of the language practice that learners get in group work, it is important not to assume that all L1 use is "bad" and all L2 use is "good." On the one hand, some L1 interjections are a natural by-product of change in the interaction, and that change could all too easily be defused by an inflexible insistence on the L2. On the other hand, some L2 contributions are simply recited, in some cases without comprehension, and thus lack any charge. It seems likely that the design and setup of the task will affect the quality of language practice in group work. (p. 233)

Macaro (2001) also examined the student teachers' code-switching in the classroom and their decision making in this process. His findings supported Hancock's claims, thus to relieve the teachers who worry about the over use of L1 in group work activities, the results of this study revealed "comparatively low levels of L1 use by the student teachers and little effect of the

quantity of student teacher L1 use on the quantity of L1 or L2 use by the learners” (p. 531). His study also suggested that code-switching did not necessarily root in the teachers’ belief.

### **Conclusion**

The role of the learners’ mother tongue in EFL classroom seems to be elevating as fast as it is moving to the heart of the main professional debates. The present article aimed at illustrating a chronology of the use of L1 from the age of methods to beyond methods, to draw a feasible, framework for the researchers and professionals and provide food for thought to explore the gaps in different areas of the current debates. Thus it seems natural to be difficult to come to a conclusion for an on going process. Hence following the stages of the history of L1 use, we can identify sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic reasons for the use of mother tongue in the classroom which are mostly grounded on theory and perception rather than sound empirical classroom research. This topic calls for more detailed classroom research on the specified areas.

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