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L1 in the English Classroom

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In a lot of classrooms around the world the 'English-only' policy, where the use of the target language only, is the norm. Even though there has been some research carried out - especially in the last 15 years - to support the idea that the L1 (the student's mother tongue) has a place in English learning. There is still considerable skepticism of whether that is true or not. Some of this skepticism and prejudice is rooted in methodologies that emerged at the end of the 20th century and have lasted until present days. The Direct Method, as the precursor of the idea that L1 should be banned in the classroom, ended up influencing several subsequent methods, including the widely spread Communicative Approach.

Many schools operate an English only zone to encourage practice outside class.

Pic by author

For instance, these notions that new vocabulary and the meanings of words should only be explained by the use of the target language are still reinforced in language centers everywhere, despite the fact that research has shown that the use of the target language only is not pedagogically justified (Sampson, 2012).

It is easy to see how the use of the L1 could be effective and easy to put into practice in monolingual classes, since all students would share the same language – and sometimes even the teacher would. However, when it comes to multilingual contexts, the teacher most likely does not speak their students' many L1s and therefore, using a language that is not the target language seems impractical. Nonetheless, the issue goes beyond the language choice, that is, to teacher-students roles. Traditionally the teacher establishes what is best for the students based on their own status and knowledge of the field, but as pointed out by Freire (as cited in Butzkamm, 2003), 'central to acquiring the skills and confidence for claiming more power outside the classroom is a shift of power inside the classroom'.

In addition to helping learners feel at ease with the L2 by using the L1 or supporting reiteration and socialization in the classroom (Sampson, 2012), the use of the mother tongue is also related to deeper aspects of learning, the particularity of the individual and the distinctive types of power which occur in this context, as mentioned above. This article aims to describe some of the advantages of the use of the L1 in the English classroom, as well as provide some ideas for activities teachers can use to encourage students to use L1 in a beneficial way.

Benefits of the use of L1

Competent L2 (target language) users code-switch regularly, that is, they alternate between their languages in the context of a single conversation, which means that people who speak more than one language often code-switch. Unfortunately, in the classroom context, code-switching is rarely considered a strategy or a valuable asset, since although teachers are always trying to make the language classroom a reflection of the real world, they seem to forget that in the real world, code-switches happen all the time.

Another aspect of the discussion of L1 in the classroom is that apart from the dominance of English native speakers who cannot speak the language of their students, the production of textbooks by Anglo-American countries 'constitutes one of the reasons behind the sanctification of, and the demand for, monolingualism in the classroom' (Butzkamm, 2003, p.30). In fact, by preventing our learners from using their mother tongue in the classroom, we might be contributing to a power imbalance in the classroom.

Beyond the cultural identity of each and every society, language shouldn't only be seen as a means of communication, but as a power mechanism. For Phillipson (1992, p.193), when learners' L1 is not allowed to be used in the classroom context, "the teaching leads to the alienation of the learners, deprives them of their cultural identity, and leads to acculturation rather than increased intercultural communicative competence".

Teachers can help in this by using an empowering approach, allowing learners to use their L1 to draw on their strengths. By making room for learners' mother-tongue in the classroom we are giving them the opportunity to talk about important issues in their lives which they may not be linguistically ready (in the L2) to do. Also, we open the possibility of critical reflection, which can act as a means to establish a power balance between teachers and students.

It seems that along with teaching a language, we should make our learners aware of identity and power, which is crucial to bolster their autonomy. Learners need not only to learn the target language, but also be aware of the different varieties of English and the links between language and identity.

According to research (Little, 1995), autonomous learners have an authentic approach to language, as well as being intrinsically motivated and having a metacognitive awareness of the language learning process, which could also be traced back to the use of metalanguage and the L1 in the classroom context.

The purpose of accepting and embracing students' L1 in the classroom is to support them with metalanguage, promote knowledge and awareness of their own identity and help transfer the power of the teacher to the learner, generating autonomy and motivation.

Tips on how students' L1 can be used

A very popular way of using L1 in classrooms, which can also be used with multilingual groups, is reverse translation. In this activity, learners translate something (a few sentences, a short paragraph, etc.) from English into their own language at

the beginning of a lesson. At the end of it, they translate everything back to English (this can also be done in different lessons). Finally, they compare their final translation with the original in small groups, which can lead to creating awareness of how English works, even if they are working with someone who has a different L1 from them.

When doing translation work, the teacher might want to encourage students to justify their choice of words, which can develop higher order thinking skills, since students will have to consider appropriacy, context, register, differences in word order, false friends, amongst other features of both languages.

Another way of fostering awareness is exploring vocabulary and the nuances of vocabulary items in both students' L1 and English. Additionally, comparison between grammar units, where students will have the opportunity to highlight differences between the two languages, can possibly avoid negative transfer.

When reviewing grammar or vocabulary, it is also possible to use reverse translation. The teacher dictates some sentences (from an exercise in the coursebook) in English and students do not write them in English, but in their own languages. After giving them time to write everything, students work in pairs and translate the sentences back into English, without looking up the sentences in their coursebook. Finally, students are allowed to consult their books to compare their translations with the original sentences. There could be a discussion on interesting points that arose while monitoring or during feedback at the end (Wilson, 2015).

We can also ask students to translate menus or show them short videos in English and ask them to write subtitles in their L1. Translation is a real-life activity and many of our learners need to translate on a daily basis, whether it be formally or informally (when sending an email at work or travelling with family, for instance).

These are just some ideas, but a lot can be done with learners' L1, even in multilingual groups. The monolingual policy present in language centers all over the world does not take into account the learner's most vivid experience, that is, their own first language (Phillipson, 1992). It is high time our learners' language finds its place in the English classroom.

> **"Translation is a real-life activity and many of our learners need to translate on a daily basis, whether it be formally or informally"**

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