

Cognitive Connections: Using Interlanguage in the English Classroom

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Abstract

The function and use of a student's first language as part of the second language acquisition process has been heavily debated over the years. This author argues that an ELL's use of interlanguage, which consists of any languages that the learner knows, is not only unavoidable as a cognitive function, but is a valuable tool in promoting language awareness. By making explicit and conscious cognitive connections between a learner's first language and target language, the learning process is facilitated by accessing the learner's prior knowledge, thereby scaffolding the new target language input. Judicious use of the student's first language can be helpful in the EFL classroom, and promoting the consciousness in students of how their interlanguage works increases their understanding of language itself. Use of first language also aids in the creation of a safe and open learning environment wherein target language input may be more easily absorbed. The role of the first language in the target language classroom is multifaceted and its use requires delicate judgment on the part of the teacher and learner; teachers and students should not entirely shun all use of first language, but use their knowledge of prior languages as a bridge to the target language.

Key words: Language Awareness, Interlanguage, Scaffolding, Second Language Acquisition, L1

Introduction

As a teacher of English as a second or foreign language, and also a language learner myself, I have wondered much about the connection between the increase of language awareness and the evolution of a learner's interlanguage, or learner language. A language learner will use whatever linguistic resources they have to communicate, and this mix of languages and linguistic structures (and resultant errors) are what is referred to as interlanguage (CARLA, 2014). It is a natural, fluid process that morphs and evolves along with the learner's language skills, like the progression of a painter gradually adding paint to her masterpiece. If the process of this blending of languages is an unavoidable part of language learning, how can we as language instructors and policy makers utilize and create awareness of this process in our classrooms?

This question should be asked by any second language (L2) instructor and is of great interest to me in creating the best possible learning environment for my students. In this paper I will address the debate about actively using the students' first languages (L1), which is an integral part of their interlanguage, and why acknowledging a student's first language(s) is beneficial to the learning environment. There is still much debate about how a student's L1 should be used and practical guidelines have not yet been established, but most current research and scholarship are currently in agreement that judicious L1 use is not only beneficial, completely avoiding L1 use is practically impossible.

The Debate

There has been much debate over the decades whether L1 should or should not be used in the L2 classroom. These debates have extended beyond the scope of the classroom. In her seminal article, Auerbach (1993) examined the socio-political implications of using English only in the classroom, claiming that denying students the use of their first language is tantamount to disparaging their cultural identity. She argues that English-only policies in the classroom and

elsewhere maintain language minorities at a low power level for the benefit of the English-speaking majority. Regrettably, these same issues are still a hot topic today in the United States, nearly two decades later as seen by the extensive lobbying for English-only laws and immigrant rights.

On the pedagogical side of the debate, in the past it has been argued that L1 use is detrimental to the learner's target language (TL) development, especially by those who subscribed to certain TL-exclusive methods such as Direct Method and Audio-Lingual Method. It was commonly believed that the L1 is merely interference that must be overcome in order to successfully acquire the TL (Turnbull, 2001; Brown, 2007). Other methods on the opposite side of the spectrum, such as Community Language Learning or even Grammar Translation, fully embrace the use of the first language and directly employ it as an essential part of the classroom activities and learning strategies.

In the past few decades, however, there have been some researchers who argue that the L1 has been a neglected resource (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001). Especially in the new millennium, there has been a serious call for redefining the role of L1 in the classroom to take advantage of the many social and cognitive benefits that the use of L1 offers. Cook (2001) and Turnbull (2001) were among the first scholars in this century to take an earnest look at how L1 is used and how it can be an important tool for teachers and learners alike. There have also been numerous studies conducted recently in order to determine how teachers and students use the L1 in the classroom, as well as their attitudes toward this use (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Celik, 2008; Huerta-Macias & Kephart, 2009; Levine, 2003; Liu, et al, 2004; Macaro, 2001; Rodriguez Juarez & Oxbrow, 2008; Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Scott & de la Fuente, 2008; Schweers, 1999; Turnbull, 2000, Cummins, 2009).

Although these studies have generally been of small scale and have been conducted in a wide variety of contexts (high school, university, foreign language, etc.), the results of each study show significant agreement that there is indeed a place for the L1 in the L2 classroom. Together these studies may be used to formulate a general description of how the L1 is used, in what contexts, and for what purpose (which will be discussed later on in this paper). However, due to the extreme variations in context and research methods, it is difficult to ascertain from these articles some general practical guidelines for L1 use by teachers and students. Many scholars and researchers appeal for the creation of guidelines for judicious use of the L1 in order to maximize the learning of the TL (Macaro, 1997; Cook, 2001; Turnbull, 2001). They also tend to agree that this would be difficult based on the variety of contexts that invariably arise in individual classrooms.

Cognitive Functions

Multilingual functioning is a normal process that involves interaction between or among a person's different languages. The language learner's interlanguage consists of the combination of any languages that the learner already has learned and those that he or she is in the process of acquiring, creating a system of shared meanings (Brown, 2007). Research on cognition and multilingual functioning has supported the view that two (or more) languages interact collaboratively in understanding and speaking both languages (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008).

This begs the question whether bilingual people need to, or are even able to, suppress their L1. In fact, relating the TL back to L1 is inescapable for second language learners, since they will inevitably make connections back to their pre-existing knowledge that has been codified in L1. It is theorized that by making cognitive connections between the two languages, the TL will be acquired in a more meaningful, permanent way (Brown, 2007). L1 use is particularly helpful by opening up access to a student's depository of knowledge. Often a learner will already have a concept scaffolded by their first language knowledge, therefore it is much easier to understand the target concept and focus on learning the language itself. Macaro (2001) argued that no

study has been able to demonstrate a relationship between exclusion of the L1 and improved L2 learning; on the contrary, results appear to support improved learning conditions with the inclusion of the L1.

Learners have an “inner voice” or “private speech” (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008, p. 103) which, depending on the level of the student, may either be the L1, L2, or a combination of both. Language learners commonly refer to this phenomenon as thinking in a particular language. The findings from a study by Scott and de la Fuente (2008) indicated that learners use the L1 internally as part of their interlanguage even when they appear to be operating exclusively in the L2. The participants’ reflections from the stimulated recall sessions indicated that when they were required to use the L2 during a collaborative consciousness-raising, form-focused task, they talked to themselves in the L1 as they translated the text, recalled grammar rules, reviewed the task, and planned what to say in the L2. In addition, the findings suggested that exclusive use of the L2 during such tasks may impose overly-intensive cognitive demands on learners that may have a negative impact on the distribution of cognitive resources for the task. L2-only speakers must process the L2 input, then process the L2 output through internal L1 translation, and finally produce the L2 output. Depending on the student’s language level, the inability to produce output may not show evidence of comprehension, even if the student actually understands and could explain it in L1. The findings of the study showed that not allowing use of the L1 in a collaborative process led to communicative breakdowns even where comprehension was present. Therefore, especially in situations where *Abstract* critical thinking is required, L1 may be helpful in processing and communicating information, especially for lower-level students. (Scott & de la Fuente, 2008).

L1 Uses in the TL Classroom

The L1 is used in a wide variety of ways by both teachers and students. In the past there has been more research done on teacher use of and attitudes toward the students’ L1, although there have been several recent studies about learner use and perceptions.

Use by Teachers

Teachers are generally expected to use less L1 than the students, as they are the model for the TL. In addition to the expectation that teachers use the TL as much as possible, many classrooms are multi-lingual or the teacher does not speak the students’ language, making it impractical or impossible to communicate in the L1. However, there are many different ways that teachers can and do use their students’ first languages, even if they don’t speak the languages themselves (Cook, 2001; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Macaro, 2001). Deller and Rinvulcri (2002) wrote a book compiling dozens of activities in which teachers can make explicit use of L1 in classroom activities, regardless of whether the teacher speaks any of the students’ languages. Even if L1 is not a planned activity, it may be useful. When limited time is an issue or when the students don’t understand after other attempts at explaining in the TL a single word in the L1 can be quick and effective for transferring meaning, especially for complicated or *Abstract* concepts. Many teachers find it helpful and convenient to use L1 in teaching grammar and vocabulary, as well as for classroom management such as giving instructions, assigning homework, discussing test results, etc. (Macaro, 2001; Levine, 2003).

In addition, there is the language community aspect of L1 use by teachers, which includes showing empathy, building rapport between teachers and students, and building the student’s self-esteem (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Huerta-Macias & Kephart, 2009; Auerbach, 1993). Teachers may learn words in the students’ languages or encourage L1 use to show that they value the students’ cultural identity and to create solidarity among the students. Even if teachers do not speak the language or languages of the students, they can encourage the students to make use of their L1 to aid in comprehension or to help each other (Lucas & Katz, 1994). Teachers can use these methods to create a safe and more effective learning environment for their students. Use of L1 can reduce negative affects and foster

positive feelings, which may allow for better classroom communication (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Huerta-Macias & Kephart, 2009; Auerbach, 1993, Levine, 2003; Belz, 2003). Use of the L1 usually reduces negative feelings often found in language classrooms, such as anxiety, frustration, alienation, confusion, pressure, intimidation, etc., thereby creating a more comfortable and involved learning environment that allows for more TL intake.

Use by Students

Although there are many classrooms and schools which have official TL-only policies, the reality is that L1 is omnipresent in even the strictest of situations. As previously discussed, even if students aren't obviously producing their L1 by speaking or writing, students will usually have to make the connection mentally between the two languages in order for effective learning to take place. Even in multilingual classrooms a student may make private use of his or her L1. In classrooms with shared languages, students often use their first language to explain a concept to other students or receive help from another student. They may use translation or consult bilingual dictionaries. L1 is also used for socializing before and after class or during breaks. Students report feeling less confused, greater language awareness, and a greater sense of community through using the L1 (Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney, 2008; Lucas and Katz, 1994; Huerta-Macias and Kephart, 2009; Auerbach, 1993, Levine, 2003). A student will typically need to rely on L1 less and less as he or she progresses in TL acquisition, but it can be especially useful in the earlier stages of language development (Lucas and Katz, 1994; Levine, 2003).

Many of my students have commented to me about their increasing language awareness by using and comparing the two languages, and it is my belief that explicit classroom activities that utilize student interlanguage, such as finding common errors and discussing why they occur, can improve language awareness as a whole and create better learners.

Perceived Dangers of L1 Use

One of the most cited drawbacks of L1 use is the danger for overuse of and dependence on the L1. Indeed, this was the main reason that for much of the 20th century L1 use was often stigmatized. Even now, the use of L1 is often referred to by teachers in terms with overwhelmingly negative connotations, such as “crutch” and “last resort” (Auerbach, 1993; Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2001). In several studies performed on student attitudes toward L1 use, students also perceived dangers of the use of L1, including overuse of and dependence on the L1 (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008; Levine, 2003; Huerta-Macias & Kephart, 2009). While L1 use may alleviate classroom anxiety, it may also be a demotivating factor (Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008). Comfort, which can be regarded as a positive aspect of L1 use, may be easily transformed into laziness, and lack of effort or challenge can be demotivating. In Levine's study (2003), contrary to the expectations that increased TL use would lead to an increase in anxiety, the amount of TL use and anxiety had a negative correlation; rather, the majority of the students indicated a liking for the challenge inherent in the increased use of the TL.

Another primary argument against L1 use is the limited exposure to TL in the short timeframe of a language class, especially in foreign language contexts where the teacher may be the only source of TL input (Turnbull, 2001). Many teachers and students also see L1 use as a lost opportunity for exposure to the TL and practicing pronunciation. In some studies, researchers have pointed to overuse of the L1 (Duff & Polio, 1997) whereas other studies found relatively small frequency of L1 use in the classrooms (Macaro, 2001). However, as Turnbull (2001) points out, the exclusion of L1 in the classroom does not necessarily signify that meaningful input is increased. Though most teachers and learners agree that large amounts of input are necessary for effective learning, it is important that the input must be meaningful in order to be acquired. This is where the L1 comes into the picture to make the TL input more meaningful,

rather than bombarding students with large amounts of TL input that do not necessarily result in learner intake. Although practically everybody agrees on the need for as much TL input as possible, the supplemental use of L1 can lead to an improved environment for better language acquisition (Cook, 2001).

More Research Needed

As is often the case with research, there have been more questions raised than have been answered in the subject of first language use in second language acquisition: how do official policies affect teachers' language use? What is the relationship between teachers' TL/L1 use and the students' TL proficiency? What is the quantity of maximized, optimal TL/L1 use with guidelines about when to use L1 efficiently and acceptably? More research is also needed about L1 use, attitudes, and cognitive functions in specific contexts, and also on larger scales. There has been much research done in the university foreign language context, but very little in the context of adult immigrant/refugee ESL, for example.

Conclusion

Turnbull (2001) calls for the creation of guidelines to optimize the TL exposure through use of the L1. However, in a typical post-modern concession, I believe that due to the extreme variability of language learning contexts, it must be impossible to create a one-size-fits-all guideline about L1 use; nor am I alone in this belief (Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney, 2008). There are simply too many variables: classroom settings, learner language levels, teachers' knowledge of their students' languages, etc. Nonetheless, we can still take all these variables into consideration for each of our own classes in order to create the best possible learning environment for our students, which by most of these accounts ought to include scrupulous use of the students' first languages. We can "judiciously catalyze the intake process" (Turnbull, 2001, p. 533) by maintaining this delicate and ever-elusive L1/TL balance, thus maximizing TL exposure by using the valuable cognitive tool that is present in every second language learner, their interlanguage. It must be our challenge then as teachers is to help each unique learner in every unique class to find their L2 voice while acknowledging and making use of their interlanguage voice, thereby creating a fully-functioning bilingual individual.

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