* Should we (or should we not) use L1 In The Communicative English Classroom?

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The question of whether or not to use students' first language (L1) in the foreign language class is an issue that is as old as the teaching of a second language itself. This issue is especially relevant in culturally homogeneous adult environments where the teacher is usually a speaker of students’ mother tongue, such as the case in most Latin American EFL contexts where the teacher is usually (with very few exceptions) a bilingual teacher (native Spanish speaker or Portuguese speaker teaching English) and even a native English speaker who speaks Spanish. I believe that in the light of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) non native EFL teachers have traditionally been told why NOT to use L1 in their classrooms rather than when and how to use it in benefit of their students.

I believe the long-established communicative idea stating that the use of L1 in the EFL class should be normally reduced as much as possible and sometimes even forbidden, does not reflect the overwhelming reality most Latin American EFL classes present (both teacher and students sharing a common language and culture). Rather, it is based on a picture of ESL classes in the States or Europe where classrooms are normally formed by multilingual groups of students who do not speak the teacher’s L1 and vice versa and where the teacher is lucky to speak ONE of his students’ mother tongues. The “English Only” approach is here a perfectly valid technique, where English not only acts as the language of instruction but also plays the role of the (1) LINGUA FRANCA.

For the British version of the communicative approach students might as well not have mother tongues, Communicative methodology has always praised the famous “English Only “ approach, perhaps as Michael Swan quite sarcastically suggests “because this made it possible for us to teach English all over the world without the disagreeable necessity of having to learn other languages” (Michael Swan’s A critical look at the Communicative Approach, 1985).

In this article I will discuss the traditional view (very in vogue in many contexts) on the use of L1 in adult EFL classes, the current views on the use of L1 when learning a foreign language, and finally an aspect I consider of utmost importance, some ideas on when, when not, and how to use L1 in the foreign language class.

THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATIVE VIEW TOWARDS THE USE OF L1 IN TEACHING L2

I was trained to be a Communicative teacher. In the time I did my basic training as an EFL teacher in the late 80’s and early 90’s, if you were to be a qualified teacher you had to be one. I was taught not to use L1 in the classroom, I remember one of the items in my trainer’s observation sheet during her observation of my classes said “use of L1 “, I was encouraged to avoid using L1 and told to use it only “as the last resource possible”.

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I was taught a thousand and one forms not to use (or allow students to use) L1 in class: “getting meanings from contexts”, “paraphrasing”, “miming”, “gestures”, “the use of realia”, “paralinguistic features”, etc, etc were some of the techniques I was taught to use to avoid the “hampering” use of L1 in the class.

Using L1 impeded acquisition, we were told. The very famous L1 interference, language transfer, among others were held responsible for many of our students’ mistakes in the process of learning a foreign language. The conclusion was simple: There was little (if any) we could get from using L1 in the communicative language class.

The fact of the matter is that while teachers kept telling their students not to do it, students kept translating (and most likely will always translate) into and out of their own languages; any fairly experienced EFL teacher knows this. So how do we deal with this? What are we supposed to do with regard to something we have been told to avoid but in practice very few of us can actually manage to achieve? Does the fact that we usually cannot get our students to avoid using L1 in the classroom mean that we somehow fail as communicative teachers? These and other questions on the subject drove me to do some further research on this extremely relevant topic.

THE EXISTING MIXED VIEWS ON THE USE OF L1 IN CLT

After having been confronted with all of the issues on the use of L1 mentioned above, I decided to research CLT theory and methodology for more information on the subject of L1 in the class. Much to my surprise I did not find much information on this issue and in fact, what little information that does exist, falls into some apparent contradiction.

“When we set out to learn a new language, we automatically assumed (until we have evidence to the contrary) that meanings and structures are going to be broadly similar to those in our language.....This strategy does not always work, of course......it makes possible for us to learn a new language without at the same time returning to infancy and learning to categorize the world all over again. (Swan, 1985:96)”

This is one of the few arguments in favor of using L1 in CLT methodology. Surprisingly, despite the fact that in all of the existing data there seems to be no doubt about the benefits of its use, there is a conspicuous absence of extensive information on the subject. If using L1 is a central feature in learning a second language why has it been systematically ignored in the major CLT theoretical concepts?

It is much easier for an adult student to start learning a second language if he can bring to it his past experiences, his knowledge of the world. His personal and professional background plays an important role in both his sense of security during the process and eventual success in learning the target language. Several researchers have come to the same conclusion in this area: Even though English should be the main language in the classroom both as the language of instruction and communication they all seem to agree that occasional use of L1 may be beneficial.
“It is impossible to talk about a right balance or a perfect model for using L1, it’s not that simple. L1 can be a valuable resource if it is used at appropriate times and in appropriate ways” (Atkinson 1993 p2)

“Starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English” (Auerbach 1993 p19).

It is important to take into account adult learners’ personal and professional knowledge of the world. By reducing an adult student’s ability to communicate to the few words in L2 he may have learnt so far, we may be asking a full grown thinking adult trying to learn English for professional reasons to work at the same level of linguistic competence as any schoolboy who has no reason to learn the language other than just completing a course in his school curriculum. This can be frustrating and discouraging and can be the reason many adult learners avoid public or general learning conditions and search for more “adult customized” courses.

By using a 100% (2) DIRECT METHOD approach we can find ourselves in some bizarre situations, performing real contortionist acts when trying to explain a language item when a simple translation could save both teacher’s and students’ a great deal of time and anguish. Could you easily explain just in English the meaning of FAITH to a group of beginners? Some of us would even have problems explaining the word in OUR L1! Would it not be much faster and memorable to use its equivalent in L1 directly?

WHEN (NOT), AND HOW TO USE L1 IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS.

So far we can say that using L1 in the foreign language class has not been CLT’s favorite principle. However, recent research findings have demonstrated that much to radical CLT methodology advocates’ disagreement, it has an important place in the EFL classroom. Let us begin by mentioning when it is not advisable to use L1.

We should not overuse L1 in the classroom. Learning a second language is a difficult process. Using the target language as much as possible should be the main goal of any language course. I think there is no need to argue on this point. Therefore, we should be careful about overusing L1 to facilitate the teacher’s job. The fact that the bilingual teacher does not really need to use L2 to teach difficult or otherwise discouraging L2 items is really much of a double edged-sword. It is tremendously easy to use L1 not as a useful technique to get out of certain otherwise extremely difficult situations, but as our main teaching approach. We are NOT defending this at all.

L1 should not be used during speaking and creative activities, there is little justification for this unless misunderstanding of instructions may lead to different results. The use of L1 in pronunciation is usually inappropriate. The use of L1 should not become students’ (or even worse the teacher’s) lifesaver they can take hold of every time a difficult moment comes up. L1 should not be used to explain simple vocabulary or to remind students past items they have already studied and simply cannot remember. The use of L1 is not advisable either to save students from embarrassment or miscomprehension in the understanding of (3) COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT. It is not something they should use to avoid hard work, placate fear of failure or compensate for lack of motivation. In these cases the teacher must make students think and speak in L2.

After establishing when NOT to use L1, we can start mentioning some useful uses and forms for it in the language class. We may use L1 in the following situations and cases:
• When starting most real beginner or beginner classes to make (adult) students initially feel more comfortable when facing the "enormous" task of learning a foreign language.

• Using (4) CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS. It can be use to introduce the major grammatical differences between L1 and L2 students must be aware of.

• The teacher can take advantage of students’ common training in L1, i.e. if students know the meaning of “lungs” or “market share” in L1, it might be easier to translate the terms than to try to explain or understand the concepts.

• The teacher's knowledge of students’ L1 can also help him understand the learner’s mistakes caused by L1 interference. For instance, knowing that Spanish does not present consonant clusters starting with the sound /s/ would help the teacher improve his students’ pronunciation of words like: STOP, SPEAK, SCHOOL normally mispronounced by Spanish speakers with an initial “intruder” /e/ sound.

• L1 can successfully be used to explain complex instructions to basic levels. How could you explain in English the instructions for a (5) JIGSAW ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY, which has been designed for the level, to a group of real beginners?

• Some researchers suggest using L1 to obtain valuable and reliable feedback from students on their doubts and suggestions about the course, teacher’s approach, evaluation of self-progress, etc. Because of the linguistic barrier, most students will find it easier to speak their minds in their own languages. This can provide the teacher with priceless information to reshape his future lessons. Atkinson (1993:p.18) suggests providing “L1 problem clinics” to discuss points the students have not understood.

CONCLUSIONS

I understand that not all EFL teachers will agree with the ideas presented in this article. I particularly support the idea that English should be the main language to be used in an EFL class. I totally support communicative methodological arguments like the one saying that students should be exposed as much as possible to the target language to permit its acquisition considering that their language class is the only time when they can be in contact with the target language in their otherwise L1 environment, and the one stating that by inhibiting L1 use in the class, students are forced to think and speak in English therefore to produce (5) COMPREHENSIBLE OUTPUT and negotiate meaning.

However, I suggest that in contrast to traditional Communicative Language Teaching methodology a controlled and judicious use of L1 can have both pedagogical and affective positive effects in the communicative language class. In the light of recent research the use of L1 seems of particular importance in adult classes mainly at beginning levels with a clear tendency to decline gradually in upper levels.

Additionally, I suggest that in contrast to ESL contexts where English teaching presents a different context, EFL teachers in Latin America should take into account not just the mere linguistic aspect of English but also its important (in some countries more than in others) socio-cultural implications. By bringing English to the language class with elements of their mother tongue students will welcome English more easily and will not feel that neither the English language nor its culture is being imposed to them.

All this, is of particular importance if we are to create a student-centered classroom as most new methodological trends seem to be suggesting these days.