

# Let's Humanize Language Teaching by Using L1

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## Introduction

The role of the first language (L1) and the second (L2) in the foreign language classroom has been the subject of much discussion and considerable controversy among linguists and language teachers. It is observed that the teachers not only feel guilty while using L1 in the classroom, they use translation as a last resort and avoid translating new words. Feeling uncomfortable to translate a word in the first language themselves, most of them elicit it from a student. Even that is done mostly orally, never in writing. Majority of teachers don't want to talk about it because they always feel inferior while talking about it.

## Why do Teachers Feel Guilty in Using L1?

Why is it so? Are there any specific directions about using the first language in the classrooms? No. But, in general, teachers develop this kind of attitude because frequently, use of first language (L1) is condemned while teaching a second language (L2) such as English for reasons such as:

- Learners have to be exposed enough to English (L2)
- L2 should be taught in the same way as the children learn L1, that is naturally
- Learners should be encouraged to develop the habit of thinking in English
- Encouragement of L1 in class would interfere and force errors
- Translating at regular intervals makes the learners feel that both languages have exact equivalents
- Teaching 'communication' doesn't mean teaching 'translation'
- Most of the teacher training courses recommend use of L2 only.

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Most of the above arguments can be refuted as:

- Constant use of L2 (often incomprehensible) becomes a waste of time and there L1 saves time
- However much used, L2 is NOT L1. Learners always have a meaning-symbol system in place. So it becomes easier to approach the L2 via L1
- The fact is we all think automatically first in L1. So thinking in L2 cannot be forced
- L1 is sure to interfere whether you encourage or not because interference comes naturally. It is inevitable. Rather learners can be made aware of it through contrast and translation
- The learners have to be made aware, on the contrary, to identify true equivalents rather than literal translations
- Of course practice is needed, but you are ‘teaching’ them communication in L2, not only communicating with them
- As a teacher, you only decide which recommendations to follow according to your teaching environment

### **Need to Create Awareness among Teachers**

So, when the teachers come to know gradually that there are pedagogical, psychological, socio-linguistic and socio-cultural implications for using L1 in the L2 classroom, they start discussing about it. After research, we also find that there are a number of professionals in the field of foreign language instruction who agree that L1 has a necessary and facilitating role in the second language (L2) classroom. But, of course, ‘there seems to be a lack of awareness on the part of teachers as to how, when and the extent to which they should actually use L1 in the classroom.’ (Polio and Duff, 1994)

### **Use of L1**

As most teachers of English follow the ‘monolingual approach’ using only L2 in the framework of their classrooms, the major problem is the idea that exposure to language leads to learning. ‘Excluding the students’ L1 for the sake of maximizing their exposure to L2 is not necessarily productive.’ (Dujmovic, 2007) And, also, Mattioli is right when he comments, “most teachers say they tend to have opinions about native language use, depending largely on the way in which they have been trained and in some cases, on their own language education.” (2004, p.21)

### **Attitudes of Teachers and Students**

There have been a number of researches going on, considering the attitudes and perceptions towards the use of L1 in the foreign language classroom. These researches explore the attitudes of both, the language learners and the teachers. Some of them are given below:

- In 2001, Burden investigated the attitudes of 290 students and 73 teachers at five universities. The results showed that both students and teachers believe the importance of L1 in explaining new vocabulary, giving instructions, talking about tests, grammar instruction, checking for understanding and relaxing the students.
- Another research in a Chinese context with 100 students and 20 teachers depicts similar results. This research shows that limited and judicious use of the mother tongue (L1) in the English classroom does not reduce it’s exposure to English, but rather can assist in the teaching and learning process.
- A large scale study by Levine in 2003, revealed the same result. Levine concludes that, “despite the prevailing monolingual principle’, both the target language and the L1 appear to serve important functions.” (p.350)
- The most recent study by Dujmovic in 2007 examined the attitudes of his 100 students. He concludes that his students responded positively to the use of L1 in the L2 context and showed their interests as well.

### **Pedagogical Reasons for the Use of L1**

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Apart from that, the researchers have identified various pedagogical reasons for the use of L1 among teachers. Mainly among them are:

- To Maintain Discipline
- To Compensate Inadequacies
- To Establish Communication
- To Use L1 as a Resource for L2 Learning
- To Favour Metalinguistic Reflection
- To Reduce or Overcome Social Inequalities in the L2 Class

Now, the answers to the question ‘how much of a role the students’ mother tongue (L1) should play’ can be various. In linguistically homogeneous classes as we have in India, students need exposure to L2, and in many cases, this exposure is only in the classroom. Since there is no set formula which prescribes exact and ideal usage of the L2 in a classroom, it seems that depending on the level of the students, the teacher should maximize the use of L2, but taking every care not to exclude the L1 and cautiously endorse “bringing (it) back from exile” (Cook, 2001)

### **Using L1 is Not Bad**

Therefore, using L1 should not be disapproved by calling it ‘bad’. It is rather another useful technique to help our students learn. But of course appropriate use of it (in vocabulary meanings, Grammar explanations, Proper Instructions etc.) will make a positive contribution in learning and motivation which results in:

- Saving time that can be used for other activities in L2
- Having essential and efficient feedback for testing the learners
- Useful Learning on the whole

### **Monolingual and Bilingual Approaches**

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There have been Monolingual and Bilingual approaches, but Nation introduced a new approach called a 'Balanced' approach in the year 2003. According to him, the teachers need to show respect for learners' L1 and need to avoid doing things that make the L1 seem inferior to L2; at the same time, it is the teacher's job to help learners develop their proficiency in L2. A balanced approach is certainly required which sees a role for the L1 but also recognizes the importance of maximizing L2 use in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

The constructive role of L1 in designing a classroom syllabus, English language teaching methods, classroom management, instructing language learning skills, performing all types of activities and language assessment of students cannot be avoided and it should be repeatedly emphasized. We should finally free ourselves from the misconceptions and try to appreciate the existing alliance between the mother tongue and foreign languages. Our ultimate aim should be to have students who are proficient L2 users rather than deficient native speakers. A rational and judicious use of the first language in Second Language classrooms can only be advantageous. L1 use must be tuned up with effective target language teaching, taking into consideration learner's mother tongue and cultural background and using them to the best of their interest.

As Michael Lewis (1997) says:

It is inevitable that language learners use L1 as a resource, and that they make both helpful and unhelpful assumptions on the basis of their experience of L1. Sound pedagogy should exploit rather than try to deny this.

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