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The use of L1 in English language teaching

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Introduction

A little less than ten years ago, it was possible to refer to the learners' L1, or first language, as the 'elephant in the room' of English language teaching (Levine, 2011). Teachers could not fail to be aware of this elephant, or its impact on their students' learning, but it was rarely mentioned. Largely absent from teacher training courses and manuals, from conferences, journals and books, the topic was ignored in the discourse of ELT and it was generally held that the L1 itself should be avoided by learners.

The widespread belief that English is best taught through English alone, without the mediation of the L1, can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century when there was a rapid development of private language schools for adults, who wanted to learn a language for practical, rather than academic, reasons.¹ The marketing of these schools often focussed (as it still does) on the difference between their English-only approach and the more traditional methodologies typically used in secondary school classrooms, which were based on the 19th century 'Grammar-translation' approach. In Grammar-translation approaches, the main focus was on grammar, which was explained by the teacher in the L1, and a significant part of classroom time was devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language. Since then, a policy of English-only has spread, with many different institutions banning the use of the L1.

Times, however, have changed. Since the publication of Guy Cook's *Translation in Language Teaching* (2010), a consensus position has evolved in the academic community (but much less so for the time being in educational institutions) that not only is a policy of English-only unachievable in many contexts, but it may also be undesirable. The lack of research in support of an English-only policy, and a large number of research findings indicating that occasional use of L1 may be beneficial², has led to new interest in the role of L1 in learning another language. This is now reflected in revisions to teacher training manuals and the specifications of teacher training qualifications, at conferences and in publications.

Not only is a policy of English only unachievable in many contexts, but it may also be undesirable.

In addition to the acknowledgement that the use of L1 in English language classrooms does not necessarily entail the adoption of a traditional Grammar-translation approach, there have been a number of other developments which have challenged the orthodoxy of English-only methodology. Most significant among

¹ See Kerr (2016) for more information on the relationship between English-only policies and the influence of private language schools.
² A comprehensive summary of research findings can be found in Hall and Cook (2012).

these is a reconceptualization of the aims of language learning. There is a growing recognition that the objective for most language learners is not to become like a native-speaker, since (1) this is not necessary (or even helpful) for what they want or need to do in English, and (2) they are unlikely to achieve it. A more appropriate and realistic objective is to become a communicatively competent bilingual. Described by the Council of Europe (2001: 4) as 'a competence [...] in which languages interrelate and interact', a bilingual approach is likely to be more appropriate and fruitful than a strict policy of English-only. The updated Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2018) includes mediation (between languages) as a key component in its framework for describing how languages are used. 'Can-do' statements now include competences like translating from one language to another, or explaining, in one language, information that is derived from a text in another. In the perspective of the Council of Europe, plurilingual and pluricultural competence are fundamental parts of the aims of language education.

Like the research into the role of L1 in language learning, the move towards a more comprehensive description of language competences in the CEFR is informed by both a deeper understanding of the language backgrounds

of language learners and of the increasing diversity of language classrooms. Many classrooms, especially in large cities, contain students with very varied language backgrounds and learning needs. For example, the first language that a learner acquired as a baby may not be the same as the language that they feel most comfortable with now, and neither of these may be the same as the shared language of the classroom in which they are learning English. The rising global popularity of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) also requires educators to rethink their policies on the language of instruction. CLIL, where school subjects and an additional language are taught in tandem, is a quintessentially bilingual approach. There are many different models of CLIL, but, in most, code-switching (switching from one language to the other) and translinguaging³ (the process of using all one's language resources to achieve communicative goals) are standard features.

In the light of these changes, it is not surprising that English-only policies in English language classrooms are being rethought in many parts of the world. The rest of this paper explores ways in which the L1 may be exploited in more contemporary and communicative approaches, along with reasons for doing so.



³ See Conteh (2018) for a brief description and evaluation of translinguaging.

L1 and the teacher

Teachers' attitudes

The attitudes of teachers towards the use of L1 in the English language classroom is reflected in their teaching practices. Their attitudes will be shaped by a number of factors, including their own experience as language learners, the pre-service and in-service training that they experience, the institutional policies of the institutions in which they are working, and their experience as teachers. The picture that emerges from surveys into teachers' attitudes is mixed.⁴

Taking a global figure of English language teachers working in a wide variety of contexts, the majority believe that the L1 should be excluded from or limited in English lessons (Hall & Cook, 2013). When, however, researchers investigate teachers' actual use of L1 in the classroom (see the next section), they find that many teachers make much greater use of L1 in their classrooms than their attitudes would seem to indicate. There is often a conflict between the professed desires of teachers about L1 use and their classroom realities (Copland & Neokleous, 2011). Researchers have found that teachers often talk about 'resorting to', rather than 'using', the L1, and the choice of language reflects this tension between desired and actual practices. In this light, it is unsurprising that a substantial number of teachers (around 36% in Hall & Cook's (2013) survey) report feelings of guilt when they feel they need to use the L1. This is clearly a cause for concern: a sense of guilt is unlikely to be helpful to teachers who are striving to understand the issues and to develop professionally (Macaro, 2005). Rather than seeing L1 as a crutch to lean on in times of need, teachers will benefit from a fuller understanding of the role of L1 in language learning, so that they may exploit its potential more fully.

Many teachers make much greater use of L1 in their classrooms than their attitudes would seem to indicate.

Teachers' actual use of L1 in the classroom

There is a wide variation in the amount of L1 use by English language teachers. There are classes where it is used for as much as 90% of the time, and others where it is never used. The latter is usually found in multilingual classrooms without a shared classroom language or when the teacher cannot speak the L1 of the students. These contexts are not uncommon in private language schools, especially in English-speaking countries, but are otherwise rare. More commonly, it would appear that the L1 is typically used somewhere between 20% and 40% of the time when there is a shared L1 or classroom language.⁵ For most teachers in most contexts, some degree of L1 use is a feature of their everyday classroom practice.

On the whole, teachers make much greater use of the L1 with classes of students at lower levels. This can help to aid motivation and alleviate frustration, and the practice is supported by researchers such as Swain and Lapkin (2000) and Macaro (2000). L1 is also more frequently used in larger classes where teachers feel that it is more effective in developing a good classroom atmosphere and maintaining discipline, than it is in smaller classes.

⁴ The largest survey into teachers' attitudes towards L1 use was commissioned by the British Council and carried out by Hall & Cook (2013).

⁵ Different researchers have found different figures. Summarizing earlier research and drawing on his own studies, Levine (2014), suggests a figure of around 20%. Littlewood and Yu (2011) suggest a figure of 40% or higher may be more accurate.

Since larger classes are more common in state-run institutions than in private schools, it is unsurprising to find that there is greater L1 use in the former. Other factors that can lead to greater L1 use include:

- the stage of a course (it may take some time for some students to get used to lessons where L1 is not widely used);
- the length of a lesson (lessons of over an hour in length that are conducted exclusively in English may become very tiring); and
- the previous learning experiences of the students.

A number of studies have investigated the different ways in which teachers use the L1. These can be broadly divided into two categories: 'core functions' and 'social functions'.⁶

CORE FUNCTIONS	SOCIAL FUNCTIONS
concerned with the teaching of language	concerned with the management of the classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explaining grammar and vocabulary • checking understanding of grammar, vocabulary and texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • managing personal relationships (e.g. building rapport, maintaining discipline) • giving instructions • dealing with administrative matters

Figure 1: core and social functions for use of L1

In the widest-ranging survey of how teachers use the L1 in English language classrooms, Hall & Cook (2013) found that it was the 'core functions' that featured most prominently. It is worth remembering that there is no evidence that this explanatory function of L1 in language teaching is in any way detrimental to learning,⁷ so long as it is not overused.

Of the social functions in L1, the development of rapport and the maintenance of discipline appear to be the most common. Expressions of sympathy, for example, are likely to be better understood (by lower level learners) if

articulated in the L1. Discipline, with its almost inevitably negative affective response, is probably better not associated with the language that is being studied.

Whether the L1 is being used for core or social functions, the teacher's decision to use it is often motivated by a desire to speed things up (Macaro, 2005) or to keep the lesson moving. The time that is saved by quickly sorting something out in the L1 is time that can be used later for more productive activities (Harbord, 1992). More examples of the way in which limited L1 use may lead to greater use of English will be found in the section 'Practical classroom implications' below.

Taken together, it is clear that the different functions of classroom L1 used by the teacher can play an important role in facilitating language learning. Teachers will take into account both linguistic and non-linguistic factors when making decisions about whether or not to use the L1. Its role is likely to be more important with lower-level and younger learners, especially pre-schoolers (Scheffler & Domińska, 2018).

Arguments and counter-arguments for the exclusion of L1 from the classroom

Educational institutions may have a number of reasons for a strict English-only policy. The most common is usually a desire to differentiate the teaching approach in the institution from that which students (or their sponsors) have experienced elsewhere, especially in secondary school. There may be a perceived commercial advantage that comes with this approach, and if learners have strong expectations of being taught exclusively through English, it would be counterproductive to disappoint them, especially in short courses. There is also a practical issue which is resolved in strict English-only approaches. Most people would agree that the use of L1 should be limited: the more encounters with English the better. On the other hand, if L1 is allowed, how much should be allowed? There is a reasonable anxiety that if a little L1 is allowed, a lot will creep in. It often seems more practical to ban it altogether.

⁶ Different researchers use different classificatory systems. See Ellis (1994) and Kim & Elder (2005).

⁷ See Hall & Cook (2012) for a summary of the research. Other researchers making a strong case for the gains that may be derived from some use of L1 in language teaching include Song and Andrews (2009), Levine (2011) and Laviosa (2014).

There is always a set of pedagogical justifications behind policy decisions to exclude the L1. The most frequently cited are the following:⁸

- 1 Learners need to learn to think in English, and the use of L1 discourages them from doing so.
- 2 The use of L1, especially translation, will exacerbate the problems of first-language interference, because it encourages the false belief that there is a word-for-word equivalence between languages.
- 3 The time that is spent using the L1 is time that is not spent in using English, so L1 use deprives learners of valuable learning opportunities.
- 4 Translation is not a valuable skill to practise; learners should focus on the four main skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

All these arguments resonate with many people's common sense, but all four are worth closer inspection.

1 Learners need to learn to think in English

The argument that learners need to learn to think in English is premised on the idea that languages can and should be compartmentalised differently in the brain. The architecture of the brain, however, does not work like this. There is not one part of the brain that controls L1 and another which controls English. There is clear evidence that the brain processes two or more languages in parallel, at least to some extent.⁹ Furthermore, although the language of thought is closely related to the language we speak, it also includes imagery, sensory and emotional elements. To the extent that we do think in a language we can speak, it is unlikely that this will be anything other than L1 until we have reached an advanced level (C1+) (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). The majority of learners do not need, may not wish and will not achieve a level of proficiency that

would permit 'thinking' in English. What most learners do need to achieve, however, is a level of proficiency where they can process English without always mentally translating from their L1. The exclusion of L1 from English lessons does not accelerate the development of this fluency.

2 The use of L1 will exacerbate the problems of first language interference

First language transfer (or 'interference' as it is sometimes called) is familiar to all teachers. We tend to notice it more when it leads to errors, and less when it leads to accurate language use, but it is not always negative.¹⁰ Very often, transfer effects can be both helpful and misleading. The general meaning of the English word 'language', for example, is readily accessible to speakers of French, as it resembles the French words 'langue' and 'langage'. This helpfulness is, however, limited, as neither 'langue' nor 'langage' always translate into English as 'language'. 'Un professeur de langues' is 'a language teacher', while 'la langue maternelle' is 'the mother tongue'. At the same time, the pronunciation of 'language' is very different from the French 'langage', and transfer effects may cause some problems.

Language transfer occurs in all learning situations, so it is unlikely that it is the consequence of using L1 in the classroom. A common result of language transfer is difficulty with 'false friends' and it is hard to think of a more efficient way of dealing with this area than by directly comparing the two languages. More generally, word-for-word translation tasks may be one of the most effective ways of encouraging learners to notice the differences between English and their L1 (Laufer & Girsai, 2008).

3 Time spent using the L1 is time that would be better spent using English

As regards the third argument, it is clear that as much time as possible should be spent using English, but it does not follow that all classroom exchanges should be in English. Indeed, some classroom activities will be more productive when students are allowed to switch between English and their L1. These include, especially at lower levels and with younger learners, the development of self-motivation, metacognitive awareness-raising, self-assessment tasks

⁸ The most well-known arguments for excluding L1 were put forward over a century ago by Maximilian Berlitz (1916). More recent arguments in the academic literature are rare, but typically reiterate and expand on the reasons given by Berlitz. An example is Newson (1988).

⁹ Much of the early research in this area used brain imaging and eye-tracking technology (e.g. Spivey & Hirsch, 2003).

¹⁰ A useful short account of language transfer can be found in Ellis & Shintani (2014), pp. 235 – 240.

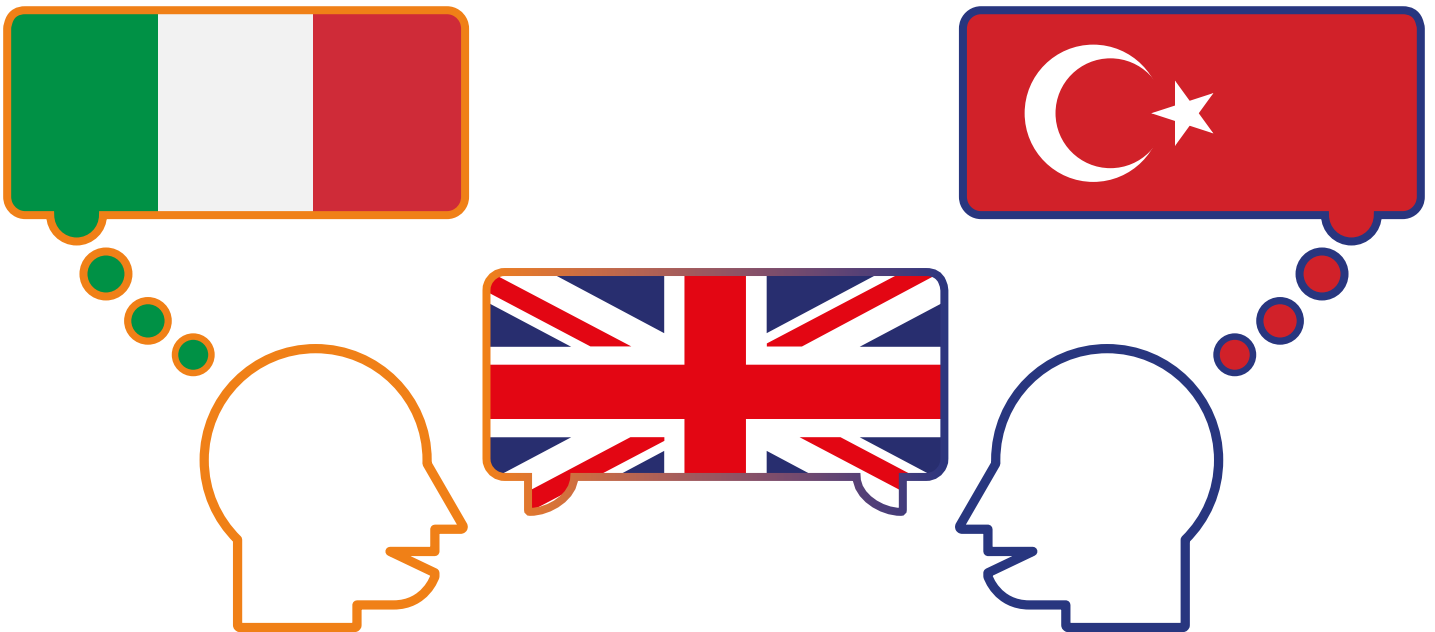
and training in learning strategies. As noted above (see 'Teachers' actual use of L1 in the classroom'), teachers often use the L1 for reasons of economy and small amounts of it may make more time available for English. Specific examples will be found in the section, 'Practical classroom implications'. In the context of classroom communicative speaking activities, further discussion and examples can be found in the Cambridge Paper in ELT, 'How much time should we give to speaking practice?' (Kerr, 2017).

4 Translation is not a valuable skill to practise

The argument that translation is not a useful skill relies on a very narrow definition of the term. It would be hard to argue that the translation of short literary extracts into and out of English, which was a feature of Grammar-translation approaches, has any great value as a life-skill, however intellectually challenging it may be. However, if translation is viewed more broadly as mediation (see reference to the new CEFR descriptors in the 'Introduction' of this paper) between speakers of two languages, its value is undeniable. Anyone who has worked or studied in a community, or lived in a country where the language is not their own, will

know that translation is part of their everyday bilingual practice. Translation, as Cook (2010) has observed, is a major part of communicative bilingual competence. In addition to its importance in a globalised and multilingual world, it has rich educational potential as a learning, diagnostic and testing tool. Concrete examples follow in the remaining parts of this paper. We should not forget, either, that many people find it enjoyable and stimulating.

The pedagogical and linguistic arguments that are advanced for excluding the L1 from English language classes may be said to be, at best, 'not proved'.¹¹ There is now a very clear consensus, among applied linguists, that some use of L1 can support the learning of English. This does not, however, mean that an English-only policy is inappropriate in all contexts for all students all of the time. Whilst the main message from research is clear, we need to bear in mind that all research is carried out in contexts which may be rather different to the context in which particular teachers are working. Practical and tactical considerations will need to be weighed up against research findings.



¹¹ See Macaro (2000).

L1 and the student

The belief, shared by many educational institutions, that English is best taught through English alone is not shared by all learners of the language. In fact, surveys of learners' attitudes towards the use of L1 in their classes regularly show that a majority approve of some L1 use. This is true of both adults and younger learners, and particularly the case with lower-level students.¹² This preference is also reflected in the enormous

success of online language learning programmes, such as Duolingo, which use translation exercises.

The most reliable way of finding out about the attitudes towards L1 use of students in a particular class is to ask them. The questionnaire in figure 2 could be used or adapted for this purpose.

Questionnaire: using your own language in the classroom

✓ Tick the boxes.

		always	sometimes	occasionally	never
1	Do you prefer your teacher to use your own language when ...				
	... giving instructions and managing the class?				
	... explaining grammar and vocabulary?				
	... correcting errors?				
	... chatting with the class?				
	... helping individual students?				
2	Do you prefer your teacher to allow you to use your own language when ...				
	... you want to check something with another student?				
	... you want to look something up (e.g. in a bilingual dictionary)?				
	... you don't understand something?				
	... you are feeling tired?				

Figure 2: Student questionnaire on using L1 in the classroom

¹² For an example of a survey of younger learners' attitudes, see Lee (2012), and for adults, see Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney (2008).

A questionnaire such as this can provide both the teacher and the school with valuable information. In classes where students use their L1 too often, the questionnaire can be a useful starting-point for a discussion leading to an agreed class policy on when L1 is allowed and when it is not. As a reflective task, it may also lead students to a greater awareness of themselves as learners and to a re-evaluation of their learning preferences and strategies. This, in turn, may lead to learning gains. Before acting on the outcome of this questionnaire, teachers and schools may need to find out more about the attitudes of other stakeholders, such as the parents of younger learners or the companies paying for professional English courses.

The largest research project looking into the ways in which students use L1 in their English classes was carried out by Hall & Cook (2013) and gathered data from 2,785 teachers in 111 countries. They found that the most frequent uses were consulting or studying bilingual word lists or dictionaries, comparing English grammar to the grammar of their own language, and watching English-language videos with L1 subtitles. All of these activities have a useful role to play in language acquisition. The next most frequent use of L1 was to prepare for tasks and activities before actually carrying out the task in English. This is not always welcomed by teachers, but it can serve a number of useful purposes: (1) it may help students to understand better what the task requires, (2) it may reduce the cognitive load of the task, and (3) it may help students to motivate each other. Without such preliminaries in L1, the task may not be completed, or even started.

Unfortunately, Hall & Cook's research (2013) did not offer any data on the students' use of L1 in the classroom for off-task reasons, such as chatting about topics that are unconnected to the lesson. Although such 'misbehaviour' can be observed in all kinds of classes, it is often particularly prevalent in groups of children at the higher end of primary school and the lower grades of secondary. It is at these ages that children feel the strongest need to explore their emerging identities by 'talking the right talk' (Tarone & Swain, 1995). Avoidance of the target language, English, and concomitantly a higher level of the L1, may be a way of limiting the possibilities of embarrassment or negative peer evaluation. Whilst these moments may be seen as disciplinary matters, teachers need to be careful not to be strict. Effective classroom management usually entails some acceptance of off-task behaviour. A zero-tolerance policy, even if it can be implemented, may banish the L1, but it also runs the risk of making students even less willing to take risks in speaking English. Some tolerance of L1 may be a necessary condition in creating a safe speaking environment in which learners feel able to explore the limits of their language competence.¹³

Effective classroom management usually entails some acceptance of off-task behaviour.

¹³ A more detailed discussion of safe speaking environments can be found in Kubanyiova (2018).

Practical classroom implications

Teaching techniques

In teachers' groups on social media, the debate around the use of the L1 in the English language classroom often centres on the need for teachers to discourage their students' reliance on it. If the argument goes, the teacher makes extensive use of the L1, the students cannot be expected to act any differently. In order to maintain the flow of a lesson, it is certainly tempting for a teacher to switch into the shared language, especially for instructions and explanations. The short-term gain may, however, lead to long-term pain as English becomes the language that is spoken about, rather than spoken with. To avoid this danger, many teachers believe, understandably, that the best classroom tactic is to implement an English-only policy.

Unfortunately, it does not always follow that an English-only policy will lead to more English language use in the classroom. If learners at a lower level are struggling to understand instructions or explanations in English, it is highly unlikely that they will produce much English. Similarly, a speaking task that is inappropriate for a group of learners, because of its language demands or its lack of relevance to their lives, will not be more successful if English-only is insisted on.¹⁴ Silence is a more probable outcome. A small number of classroom management techniques that make limited use of the L1 can (1) facilitate more extended opportunities to use English in both speaking and listening, (2) provide useful opportunities for English language learning, and (3) be reassuring to the learners.¹⁵

1. Sandwiching

It is advisable for a teacher to use as much English as possible when speaking to a class – for instructions, explanations or any other interaction. This 'teacher talk' can and should provide multiple opportunities for students to practise listening comprehension. But there will always be things that a teacher wants or needs to say that the students will not know and that cannot easily be paraphrased. Basic language for giving instructions includes verbs like 'match' and phrases like 'on your own'. Both paraphrasing and miming are possible, but neither will be easy. An alternative is 'sandwiching'. In this technique, the teacher speaks in English, but when they come to an item that will be problematic for the students, they say it first in English, then say the equivalent in the L1, and finally repeat it in English. For example:

Work in pairs, avec quelqu'un d'autre, work in pairs, and compare your answers.

When a word or expression has been sandwiched a few times, it should be possible for the teacher to assume

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of immersive speaking tasks, see Hendra and Jones (2018).

¹⁵ Scrivener's *Classroom Management Techniques* (2012) includes a very useful section on encouraging students to use English. He points out that, paradoxically, one way of encouraging it is to allow it, on occasion, not to be used.

that it will be understood without sandwiching next time. The technique can be used both for important language (e.g. the language of instructions) and for less important items that need to be understood, but can then be forgotten. Over time, very large amounts of language can be acquired by students in this way.

Sandwiching has been described as the single most important technique in foreign language teaching, but it requires practice and teachers need to be careful not to overuse it.¹⁶

2. Bilingual instructions

Sandwiching is an efficient way of moving away from a reliance on the L1 in classroom language. If possible,

teachers should keep a record of language that they have introduced in this way. It is also a good idea for students to have some sort of record. One way of doing this is to have a wall display where the phrases that have been presented are shown alongside their L1 equivalents (see figure 3). The display is most valuable and versatile if the phrases are on individual pieces of paper or card. Like this, items can be removed and new ones added when needed. Items can also be jumbled and, as a filler activity, students can be asked to rearrange the cards (see figure 4).

Another common and useful bilingual technique in giving instructions is for the teacher to explain an activity in English and then nominate a student to repeat the instructions in the L1.

Get into pairs.	Bildet Paare.
Work on your own.	Jeder arbeitet für sich.
Check your answers.	Überprüft eure Antworten.
Compare your answers.	Vergleicht eure Antworten.
in the correct order	in der richtigen Reihenfolge
in bold	fettgedruckt
in italics	kursiv
Match the words to the pictures.	Findet die den Bilden entsprechenden Worte.

Figure 3: English/German bilingual instructions, Kerr (2014)

Get into pairs.	Überprüft eure Antworten.
Work on your own.	Findet die den Bilden entsprechenden Worte.
Check your answers.	kursiv
Compare your answers.	fettgedruckt
in the correct order	Jeder arbeitet für sich.
in bold	Bildet Paare.
in italics	in der richtigen Reihenfolge
Match the words to the pictures.	Vergleicht eure Antworten.

Figure 4: English/German bilingual instructions jumbled up, Kerr (2014)

¹⁶ Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) have been very influential in promoting the use of L1 techniques in foreign language teaching. They remind their readers that the sandwiching technique is very different from the practice of some teachers who translate everything that they think their students may not understand.

3. Own-language moments

High levels of both concentration and motivation are required to operate in a language that you are learning. There is a lack of hard evidence concerning the length of time for which it is possible to concentrate with sustained attention on classroom language learning tasks. The time varies from individual to individual and from one kind of task to another. It will also be affected by a large number of factors, including mood, motivation, the size of the class and the time of the day. Many of these are outside the control of both learner and teacher. The lower the level of a learner, the harder it is to concentrate for long periods of time. In addition, the younger the learner, the shorter the period of time for which they will be able to concentrate. Since younger learners tend to have lower levels, the problems of attention span are compounded. With adults, it is estimated that attention span is rarely likely to exceed 20 minutes, but most students in any given class will not be able to concentrate for anything like that long.

Bearing these issues in mind, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect English language learners, especially lower level, younger learners, to be able to concentrate properly throughout a lesson of forty minutes or more, when only English is allowed. Whether the teacher likes

it or not, there will be moments when students 'switch off'. As far as possible, it is better for the teacher to manage when this switching off takes place. 'Own-language moments', when the students are allowed to use their own language for a few minutes, are one way of attempting to manage attention spans.

The opportunity to recharge batteries in one's own language for a few minutes may be more than enough justification for occasional own-language moments. However, there are other moments in language classes when such moments may pay dividends. Examples include:

- **before a speaking activity:** Students need time to brainstorm ideas and prepare what they are going to say before they are asked to say it. If the L1 is allowed for some of this preparation, it is likely that students will come up with more ideas, and that the speaking which follows will be more extended.
- **during a speaking activity:** When students are saying very little during a communicative speaking task, a teacher will either need to take some kind of remedial action or abandon the activity. One remedial possibility is to stop the activity and allow a few minutes of additional preparation time, when students talk with their partners in the L1 and / or consult bilingual resources. When the activity restarts, students work with a new partner. A second possibility is to ask the students to repeat the activity in the L1 for a few minutes. After they have done this, they restart the activity in English with a new partner.
- **talking about learning:** Research has shown clearly that opportunities to reflect on the learning process and to self-evaluate can lead to gains not only in language proficiency, but also in motivation and self-confidence.¹⁷ These opportunities may be quite short (at the end of a speaking task, for example) or more extended and formalised. At levels up to and including B1, such activities will need to be conducted in the L1.

It is important that students understand when the L1 is allowed and when they are expected to use English only. Teachers can tell a class what the 'language rules' are at any given moment, but they can also signal this in other ways. Some teachers use a visual system that is visible at the front



¹⁷ Goh & Burns (2012) discuss the importance of raising metacognitive awareness in the context of speaking activities in Chapter 11 of their book, *Teaching Speaking*. They also include many useful practical suggestions for designing appropriate materials.

of the room. This could be a pair of flags or, for younger learners, a pair of dolls (with one indicating English-only and the other indicating that other languages are allowed).

It inevitably takes time for a class to get used to following language rules, but a teacher's perseverance usually pays off. Once a degree of responsible learning behaviour has been reached, teachers may wish to experiment by giving even more responsibility to a class. One step in this direction is to allow the students themselves to call a certain number of own-language timeouts (five or six, perhaps) in a lesson, in a similar way to a basketball match.

Most bilingual teaching techniques are not available to teachers working with multilingual classes, although own-language moments may be possible in contexts where there is a shared classroom language. A common example of such a situation would be a group of multilingual students studying English in a school where the shared language (and usually the first language of the teacher) is the language of the country, but this language (e.g. French, Spanish, German) is not the first language of many of the students.

Tools

Discussion of L1 use in English language classes tends to focus more on what the teacher does and less on what the learners do. Teaching, however, serves the purpose of promoting learning, and the ultimate objective of most educational programmes is to encourage learners to become autonomous in their learning. In order to become autonomous, learners need to be able to know about and use a variety of language learning tools, and to use them well. Many language-learning tools are bilingual.

With increasing numbers of English language learners studying online in an independent manner, for part or all of their course, knowledge of and skill in using these tools becomes even more important.

1. Online translation

It is probably no exaggeration to say that all language learners who have access to a computer or a smart phone

know about online translation tools, and most will have used them. Learners need to know which tools are available to them. The most well-known and widely used is Google Translate¹⁸ but there are many others with widespread usage, including Microsoft Translator (which is used with Skype) and the Translate Facebook app. One that is highly rated, but currently less well-known because it was launched more recently and offers far fewer language pairings than its competitors, is DeepL.¹⁹ Learners should be encouraged to experiment with a variety of online translation tools and to do this regularly because all of these services are continually changed and improved.

Since 2017, the accuracy of online translation has improved so dramatically that some people have questioned whether language learning will even be necessary in the future. Impressive as it often is, the accuracy of online translation varies, according to the languages that are being translated from and to, and the type of text. The most frequent errors that are made by online translation are listed below.²⁰

- ◆ word order
- ◆ words with more than one meaning
- ◆ pronouns (especially object and relative pronouns)
- ◆ articles
- ◆ phrasal verbs and idioms
- ◆ complex sentences
- ◆ cultural references
- ◆ style
- ◆ new or rare words
- ◆ punctuation

In the classroom, students can be given texts that have been translated from English into their own language and asked to identify and categorise the errors that they find.

¹⁸ Google Translate is available at <https://translate.google.com/>

¹⁹ DeepL is available at <https://www.deepl.com/home>

²⁰ The number and kinds of errors varies according to the particular software and the language pairings. A fuller list of errors can be found in Kerr (2014), page 58.

It is likely that the software will make similar errors when translating into English from their L1. The activity is useful in providing training in intelligent use of online translation and can also be used to compare different services as well as to highlight differences and similarities between the languages.

2. Dictionaries

It has become common for learners to use online translation tools as dictionaries, but the practice should be discouraged as these tools are generally not appropriate for translating single words. Instead, a dictionary should be used. Most learners prefer bilingual to monolingual dictionaries and research suggests that the quality of the dictionary is more important than whether it is monolingual or bilingual. Recent years have seen the emergence of excellent bilingualised dictionaries, which combine the

best features of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, although these are not yet available for some languages that are less widely spoken. The most appropriate dictionary for an individual student will also depend on the use that is made of it. Writing a composition in English requires a rather different kind of dictionary to looking up translations for words in a text that is being read.

As with online translation tools, learners need to know about the options that are available to them and to make a selection that is appropriate to their needs. For this, they will usually need guidance from a teacher. One way of doing this is to give students a short text with a small number of lexical items highlighted, along with access to a dictionary. Students explore the dictionary by looking up the highlighted words and filling in a checklist, like the one below.

Does the dictionary ...

	YES ✓	NO ✓
... give meanings that are easy to understand?		
... give the different meanings for a word in order of importance?		
... help you to select which meaning you need?		
... help you to avoid common mistakes or confusions with your own language?		
... show differences between British and American English?		
... show how formal or informal the word is?		
... give examples of the word in a phrase or a sentence?		
... give examples of other words that go together with this word (collocations)?		
... give examples of useful or common phrases which include this word?		

Figure 5: Student checklist for selecting dictionaries

3. Flashcards

The acquisition of vocabulary is one of the main challenges of learning another language and research suggests that the deliberate study or memorisation of new words can play an important role. This is especially the case with high frequency items for learners at lower levels. Research also suggests that digital flashcards, with a target item in English on one side of the 'card' and its meaning on the other, are one of the most useful tools to approach this deliberate study.²¹ At lower levels, translations are usually preferable to English definitions, because the latter often contain words that are harder to understand than the target item.

Many free digital flashcard systems are available, including Quizlet, Memrise and Anki²² as well as others intended for younger learners. The systems vary in terms of the kinds of learning tasks (e.g. games) that are used to practise the language, and the kinds of motivational techniques that are employed (e.g. levels and leader boards). Some systems allow teachers or learners to input their own sets of learning items. Others can only be used with vocabulary sets that have already been prepared. In the case of the latter, the relevance, quality and language pairings of these sets will be the most important criterion for selecting one system over another.

Flashcard study will not suit all learners, but all learners should, at least, be made aware of the possibilities. To encourage the use of these systems, teachers will need to spend time in the classroom making recommendations and allowing students to play with the apps.

4. Other bilingual resources

With internet access, there is a huge range of other bilingual resources that can promote English language learning. There are thousands of websites and apps that are dedicated to learning and many adopt a bilingual approach. These include everything from explanatory grammar videos and conversation exchanges to enjoyable interactive games for all ages. The quality is, of course, very variable. In addition to these, English language learners are especially fortunate because

of the wealth of sites offering subtitled movies, dual language books or comics or translated song lyrics.

It is worth spending some classroom time making students aware of these resources or encouraging them to share what they have discovered for themselves.

Activities

Supplementary bilingual learning material has long been popular. In some countries, 'Course Companions' which accompany international coursebooks are available. These usually contain bilingual word lists and grammatical notes that draw attention to areas of grammar that cause particular problems for learners with a particular L1. Bilingual reference and practice books for grammar are also extremely popular.²³ However, it is only in recent years that classroom activities which exploit the L1 have begun to reappear in coursebooks themselves. These tend to be short translation tasks which focus on grammar and vocabulary, and encourage learners to notice the similarities with or differences between English and their own language.

A much wider range of classroom activity types is offered in *Translation and Own-language Activities* (Kerr, 2014) and *Using the Mother Tongue* (Deller and Rinvoluceri, 2002). These include:

- contrastive analysis activities where the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of English and the L1 are directly compared
- study of transfer effects
- bilingual roleplays
- bilingual writing
- using bilingual resources to prepare students for English texts
- responding in L1 to English texts (reading and listening) – e.g. bilingual note-taking and summarizing
- making use of bilingual glossaries for reading texts
- exploiting dubbed and subtitled videos

²¹ See Nation (2008) for more information on deliberate vocabulary learning.

²² These flashcard systems can be found at <https://quizlet.com/>, <https://www.memrise.com/> and <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>.

²³ The *English Grammar in Use* series from Cambridge University Press, for example, offers bilingual versions of *Essential Grammar in Use* (Murphy, 2015) in a number of languages including Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish.

An example of one classroom activity will be described here.

Reverse translation, also known as back translation, is a language learning activity which has been used for about 500 years. Students first translate a text from English into their L1. Later, usually in a subsequent lesson, they translate it back into English. Finally, they compare their English translation with the original text. Through the process of working to and fro between languages, learners are presented with multiple opportunities to notice features of language and to experiment with using them. The potential for language learning is greatest when students work together. When students are translating the text back into English from their L1 versions, it does not matter if one student has first translated the text into, say, Spanish, and the other into Turkish. In fact, the learning potential is even greater.

This activity can be used with almost any kind of text. If teachers wish to target a particular language feature (e.g. a tense or a set of vocabulary), a text that is rich in these features can be selected. This could even be a completed gap-fill exercise from the coursebook. It can also be used in the development of writing skills when, having studied a model text (e.g. an example of a written genre that students will need to produce in an exam), students then translate it both ways. Finally, reverse translation can be used with short authentic texts of intrinsic interest. In this case, the learning outcome is less predictable, but the learning potential is equally rich.



Conclusion

For many years, the issue of L1 in English language teaching was barely discussed. It was largely absent from teacher training courses, teacher training manuals, teachers' magazines and as a topic for teaching conferences. It was simply assumed that teaching English through English was the best way to do it. The situation has changed dramatically over the last ten years. Research into the area has grown enormously. New editions of the most popular teacher training manuals include sections on using the L1 and it is now a popular conference topic. Exercises which involve translation are becoming more common in coursebooks. The latest version of the syllabus for the Cambridge English Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) includes a section on multilingualism and the role of first languages.

More resources that exploit L1 in English language teaching are now available to teachers. In addition to the books by Kerr (2014) and Deller and Rinvolutri (2002)

already mentioned, both *Multiple Voices in the Translation Classroom* (González Davies, 2004) and *Translation and Language Education* (Laviosa, 2014) are rich sources of practical ideas, especially for students in higher education.

It would be wise, however, not to get too carried away. English-mainly is generally a better rule of thumb than English-only, but, clearly, blanket acceptance of L1 use in English classrooms is no better than blanket banning. Overuse of L1, which can lead to a dependency on it, is arguably a more pressing concern. The question of how much L1 use, and of what kind, is appropriate in any teaching context can only be answered by careful consideration of that context by the teacher. This consideration will need to be informed by a clear understanding of the relative advantages and disadvantages of L1 use. It is hoped that this paper will help teachers make more informed choices.

Recommendations for further reading

The best overview of the research that has been carried out into the use of L1 in language classrooms is Hall & Cook (2012). Hall & Cook's later article (2013) provides a briefer summary of the theoretical background. A shorter article that also covers very similar ground is Kerr (2016).

For practical classroom ideas, Kerr (2014) is the most recent collection and offers a wide selection of generic task types that can be adapted to most classroom contexts. Deller & Rinvulcri's (2002) compendium of classroom activities was ahead of its time when it was published. Some of the 115 activities focus on particular language areas, but most are generic task types that can be adapted to different contexts. For teachers of translation at university level, González Davies (2004) will be especially valuable, but it contains many practical ideas that can be used by all language teachers.

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