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On Native Language Intrusions and Making Do with Words: LINGUISTICALLY HOMOGENOUS CLASSROOMS AND NATIVE LANGUAGE USE

The buzz of young people in a warm, sunny space, colorful posters and signs on the walls, traffic sounds wafting in on summer breezes… The lesson is about to begin. The teacher enters, approaches the desk, takes out books and papers, and turns to the board to write a preliminary pair-work speaking prompt. She hears the hum, the chatter, all the while pretending not to follow, not acknowledging the banter while smiling to herself. She understands, yet chooses not to join in. After all, the students are speaking their native language and this is an English lesson, so English only, right? Well…

For many years, research has encouraged English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers not to use any language but English in their classrooms. Popular teacher-training manuals promote the school of thought that "if students are not motivated to use English in the classroom or are pressured by peers to follow a hidden set of classroom rules that includes interacting in the students' native language, then…techniques to compel students to use English can become novelties for the students, ones that will likely wane in their effect quickly" (Gebhard 1996, 84). Most teachers 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. They bring these opinions, and the manifestations of them, to the profession and therefore to the classroom.

An EFL classroom is a place where one of three situations typically exists: (1) the students and teacher all share a native language and culture, and the English language is part of a purely academic undertaking; (2) the teacher, despite being a native English-speaker, has spent many years in the students' culture and has anywhere from a basic understanding to a near-native grasp of the language; or (3) the students share a first language (L1), but the teacher has come from her own country to bring the English language and all that comes with it. In the first and second contexts, where the teacher can speak the students' L1, the dilemma often arises of whether or not to use it in classroom interactions. Many English language teaching professionals claim L1 use in the classroom is unthinkable, something that should never happen in today's modern, communicative lessons. They wonder how students can truly appreciate meaningful target language exchanges if they are continually relying on their L1s. There are, however, a considerable number of advocates of Atkinson's (1993) *judicious use* theory, those who say that perhaps the teacher and students can exchange in the L1 without harming the communicative focus of second language (L2) lessons. These advocates claim that "the L1 can be a vital resource, and there is certainly no reason why any teacher of monolingual classes should feel that it is somehow 'wrong' to make use of it" (Atkinson 1993, 13).

This article will endeavor to show both sides of this crucial issue, presenting evidence from research into L1 use in classrooms around the world, as well as evidence of the importance of creating an English haven in a linguistically homogenous classroom. To this end, I have chosen two main questions around which to develop this discussion. First, how do EFL teachers use L1 in the classroom? And second, have second language acquisition studies shown any positive or negative effects from the use of L1 in the EFL classroom? By investigating these two aspects of native language use, I hope to come to a better understanding of my own actions in the EFL context.

The context: ESL versus EFL

To appreciate the classroom setting on which this article focuses, a distinction between the English as a second language (ESL) and EFL environments needs to be made. ESL classrooms are usually made up of students from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic realities, who often share nothing more than their immigrant or non-native status in an English-speaking country and, in the best of all possible worlds, a reasonably similar level of proficiency in English. Murphy and Byrd (2001, 4–5) define ESL as "the teaching of English…in countries…where English is the major language of commerce and education," where students "are likely to hear English being spoken on a regular basis in settings beyond the classroom." EFL generally encompasses all other teaching situations that do not fall into this category. In the EFL teaching environment, students most likely only speak English in the classroom, or on very limited occasions outside of the classroom. Therefore, in the EFL context, the lesson minutes are priceless slots of time for input, output, and practice. The use of L1 can appear to get in the way of optimal lesson time management; it can seem like a detracting force that bursts the fragile bubble of L2 communication that the instructor has created.

Choosing to use the L1

Although most teachers make a conscious, principle-based effort to operate in the target language during lessons, there are a few situations that seem to warrant L1 use. Lin (1990) found that in Chinese EFL classrooms, Cantonese had a definite parallel position to English in verbal exchanges. She noted that English is

the "language of instruction," while Cantonese is the "language of explanation and illustration" (18). For example, she describes a lesson sequence that begins with an introductory phase that includes English, is followed by explanations in Cantonese, and ends with a summary of key points in English.

To analyze the use of L1 and L2 in the EFL classroom, Lin conducted research based on a diary study by a Hong Kong secondary school EFL teacher named Ho. Ho recorded her language use in two remedial English classrooms. In Group A she spoke only English, and her findings showed that she used more visual aids, gestures, and examples, as well as rephrasing of explanations, so as not to break the L2-only language policy. This policy did in fact break down slightly on occasions when two "especially weak" students sought clarification outside of class (Lin 1990, 19).

In Group B, Ho spoke both L1 and L2, and she found that using the Cantonese L1 was associated with five functions: explaining vocabulary, giving instructions, explaining language rules, reprimanding students, and talking to individual students. Lin does not specify, but a possible explanation for Ho's use of L1 to talk to individual students could be the need for a one-on-one conference, or even an informal interaction during class time, as opposed to moments of whole class teacher talk.

It is important to note that Ho was not initially an advocate of the use of L1 in the EFL classroom. However, after carrying out the diary study, she found she appreciated L1 interactions in EFL lessons. Ho felt that the use of Cantonese had a positive effect on her students' comprehension and on discipline problems, and it efficiently reduced the time devoted to giving instructions. Nevertheless, as she came to value the use of L1 in the classroom, Ho experienced "various identifiable stages of guilt, frustration, and confusion" (Lin 1990, 20). That she had such a notable emotional reaction to L1 use in the classroom brings us back to her training. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, many teacher-education programs emphasize a minimalist, if not an absolutist, position on L1 use. In Brown's (2001, 180) discussion on group work, for example, he points out that teachers are often reluctant to use L1 in class because they feel that "students in small groups will *covertly* use their native language." The choice of the word covertly clearly suggests that some teachers perceive these exchanges as taboo.

Several studies support the positive effects that Lin reported, further questioning the logic of many teachers' reluctance to use L1 in the classroom. In their research on the use of L1 in L2 classrooms, Anton and DiCamilla (1998) offer evidence that L1 is a valuable tool for socio-cognitive processes in language learning, something that may go against the grain for many traditional English language teaching (ELT) professionals. Referring to learners working together on a writing task, and taking into account the relationship the learners have with each other, Anton and DiCamilla (1998, 318) state that the "language of expert, or otherwise more knowledgeable, peers and of learners best serves the goal of moving the learner…to the point where the learner becomes self-regulated in the performance of some task." In this type of interaction, slower learners build on other (and perhaps more advanced) learners' knowledge as they grasp new notions in the L2 classroom, and the use of L1 is an important component in the process.

Wells (1999) also agrees with the positive impact of using L1 in tasks to achieve L2 learning, but he is critical of Anton and DiCamilla's interpretations of *scaffolding* and *intersubjectivity,* which together define the process whereby learners rely on each other's knowledge of L1 lexis and structures to access corresponding lexis and structures in L2. Wells points out that Anton and DiCamilla conceive of scaffolding too narrowly and apply it to a weaker/stronger dyad where one partner is clearly at a higher level of proficiency than the other, and the two work together in a quasi-teacher/student relationship. He feels that a more accurate description of how learners engage in pair work would be "collaborative problem solving" (Wells 1999, 250). The term *intersubjectivity* is defined as a shared perspective between interlocutors, when "individuals working in collaboration define the objects (both concrete and abstract), events, and goals of a task in the same way" (Anton and DiCamilla 1998, 319). While Anton and DiCamilla state that a certain level of shared perspective must be reached and maintained, Wells believes that it is the ongoing effort to achieve a shared perspective that provides the basis for learning. Aside from

these differences, Wells (1999) and Anton and DiCamilla (1998) agree that problem solving comes about more easily and naturally when the L1 is used, and it can provide a foundation for learners to build L2 structures, especially during collective activities in class.

A positive affective environment

Another reason that is cited for L1 use in the classroom relates to the fostering of a positive affective environment. Schweers (1999, 7) encourages teachers to insert the native language into lessons to influence the classroom dynamic, and suggests that "starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves." This idea of validating learners' experiences relates to Atkinson's (1987, 241) mention of the "actual corpus of language (their mother tongue) which all learners bring into the classroom." Instead of seeing students' minds as a *tabula rasa,* English teachers can recognize students' previous experiences with language and learning and can build on them, and they can expand on learners' linguistic knowledge by employing the L1 intelligently. An attitude of respect for a learner's linguistic maturity can help create a better classroom environment. This is true with young learners as well, especially in countries where English is seen as having an imperialistic role. In such cases, "use of the mother-tongue is a signal to the children that their language and culture have value, and this will have a beneficial effect on self-perceptions, attitudes, motivation and, consequently, on achievement" (Garrett et al. 1994, 372).

Papaefthymiou-Lytra's (1987) research into how L1 fits into EFL lessons in Greek classrooms indicates that affective issues play a large part in a teacher's choice of language. As Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1987, 25) relates, the L1 takes over "when teachers or learners want to express other role relationships" besides the customary "teacher-learner relationship in a more teacher-centered classroom." Because EFL learners usually share the same native language and cultural background, English can be a barrier between the class and the instructor, something that may get in the way of a more casual relationship with the teacher. According to Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1987), instances of spontaneous humor, or comments on class activities, tend to occur in L1, providing the solidarity and camaraderie also mentioned by other researchers (Lin 1990; Harbord 1992; Polio and Duff 1994).

Some guidelines for L1 use in the classroom

Macaro's (2001) study of code-switching and L1 use in the classroom presents evidence similar to that found by Lin (1990) and Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1987) in that teachers employ the native language for clearly defined reasons. Importantly, Macaro's research shows virtually no evidence of detrimental effects on acquisition due to the kind of calculated L1 use most teachers favor, and he concludes that no study to date has succeeded in demonstrating a "causal relationship between exclusion of the L1 and improved learning"; he does, however, recommend that the language teaching community dedicate itself to research that might establish "parameters of L1/L2 use" as a framework for teachers in training, to bring them to an optimal balance of resources (Macaro 2001, 544–45).

Indeed, the positive aspects of L1 use are not meant to detract from the benefits of maximizing practice opportunities with the target language in the classroom. Ellis (1984, 133) notes that too much L1 use could "deprive the learners of valuable input in the L2." Mackey's (1999) report on input and interaction stresses how conversation, negotiation, and interaction all work together to develop a learner's interlanguage, based in part on Long's (1996) hypothesis that interaction facilitates acquisition "because of the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in such discourse" (Long 1996; cited in Mackey 1999, 558). Teachers therefore need to be aware of the possible lack of actual learning that greater L1 use can imply.

Atkinson (1993, 12) agrees with the need to maximize L2 usage, and he states that "every second spent using the L1 is a second *not* spent using English—and every second counts." However, he also describes how to achieve a proper balance of L1 in the learning process, which can be done without depriving learners of valuable L2 input. This balance is achieved by measuring out L1 use in carefully considered doses according to four factors: (1) the students' previous experience, (2) the students'

level, (3) the stage of the course, and (4) the stage of the individual lesson. As a panacea for the terminally guilty, Atkinson (1993, 18) proposes an "L1 problem clinic," where on a weekly or monthly basis learners could talk about problems, as a group, in L1. In this way, teachers could maintain L2-only policies in class, and remain true to their training. The activities and questionnaires Atkinson (1993) provides show that the middle ground might be the only comfortable solution for most modern graduates of TEFL courses.

Translation as a learning tool

One major criticism of native language use in the classroom is that it can cause students to think that every word or structure they encounter in English has a viable L1 correspondent. As most language professionals know, this one-to-one correspondence is not true. Many lexical items, especially those with idiomatic connotations, make sense only in one language and cannot transfer to others. Despite the traditionally negative view of translation, precisely for this reason, Atkinson (1993, 53) claims that by raising one's consciousness of the nonparallel nature of languages, the learning process becomes richer; translation not only "allows learners to think comparatively," but it is also "a real life activity" because students who learn English for their jobs will probably need to know something about translation.

Atkinson provides an example of a translation activity that forces students to push themselves beyond the tendency to rely on more proficient classmates for ready translations, a common pattern in linguistically homogenous classrooms (Atkinson 1993, 58). In the activity, students work in groups to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of several holiday destinations. As they work, they write down words or phrases they lack in English that would make their planning easier. At the end of the activity, the teacher elicits these notes and puts them up on the board for the groups to discuss. This stage involves coming up with strategies to circumvent the language problems they might have, such as finding synonymous phrases, simplifying terminology, providing explanations as opposed to exact words, and other strategies. In this way, students come to see their shared native language as an active part of the learning process, not

just something to fall back on when things become confusing in class.

In fact, in the introduction to his book on the subject of translation, Duff (1989) expounds on the merits of translation as a language learning activity. He describes how translation can help develop three characteristics essential for language learning: flexibility, accuracy, and clarity. For example, translation "trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity). This combination of freedom and constraint allows the students to contribute their own thoughts to a discussion which has a clear focus—the text" (Duff 1989, 7). Whether or not one accepts Duff's evaluation of "text" (many texts quite seriously lack the focus he attributes to them), his notion of a combination of freedom and constraint seems in keeping with second language acquisition research findings on interactionally modified input (Pica, Young, and Doughty 1987) and on good language learners (Norton and Toohey 2001).

Others have described different findings. In her research Murrah (2001, 7) suggests that there is evidence that translation used to facilitate comprehension is a signal of a breakdown in communication, not a choice of activity. Murrah also mentions what Polio and Duff (1994) confirm as well—that these moments are "genuine opportunities for students to negotiate meaning in the (target) language and to develop strategies to correct and adjust their communication" (Murrah 2001, 7). Polio and Duff (1994) claim that the onus is on the teacher, not the students. In referring to an EFL context, they state: "If teachers resort to English (e.g., by translating difficult TL [target language] items), students will be less likely to attend to the TL forms" (323).

While the above observations regarding the merits and drawbacks of translation appear to be in contradiction, it is important to note that a distinction can be made between translation of written and spoken texts as a reflective activity to expose students to language and interlanguage differences and translation as a sign of communication breakdown in an activity where students are expected to create and negotiate spontaneously in the target language. Murrah (2001) and Polio and Duff (1994) are making a case against this break-

down, not against translation as a lesson in language awareness.

Conclusion

From the readings and investigations explored in my research, a trend towards Atkinson's (1993) judicious use theory seems the only logical course of action. Rigidly eliminating or limiting the native language does not appear to guarantee better acquisition, nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities as native speakers of a valuable language that is as much a part of them as their names (Harbord 1992, 351). In my own classrooms, I have had occasion to experiment with both sides of the issue. For the first eight years of my EFL teaching, I followed the Direct Method's target-language-only credo as a Berlitz EFL instructor. I then attended a Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) course, which brought me into the maelstrom of Communicative Language Teaching and more eclectic approaches. The combination of these two training experiences, coupled with the instinctive sense that every teacher has of what works and what does not, has led me to appreciate native language use as the resource researchers deem it, but to relegate its use to specific situations, and to the learners themselves.

I personally never use the L1, but I do encourage learners to do so to facilitate comprehension and enhance the clarity of instructions. I ask beginning learners to translate in their home study and require them to purchase and learn to use bilingual dictionaries. I do not, however, bring bilingual dictionaries into the classroom, as I feel that classroom time is better used in English. I instead require learners at the intermediate level and above to learn how to use monolingual dictionaries and to get away from relying on translations that may bring them more confusion than aid. As an illustration of this point, I use an activity in which learners look up Latinate words in bilingual dictionaries, only to find that if they do not know the word in their L1, finding the translation without a subsequent explanation is useless. However, when they search for the same word in a monolingual dictionary, they find a simplified definition and an example that brings the word to life. I do not mind if group work happens in the native language, so

long as they are discussing the task at hand and deliberating on English usage.

It is unrealistic and impractical to insist that learners refrain from native language use altogether, when by exchanging briefly in the L1 (instead of struggling in English) they can move forward in the task and comprehend a point much more quickly. As an EFL teacher and non-native speaker of Italian who lived through second language acquisition as an adult in a foreign country, I can empathize with my students. Even for ESL learners, language in the classroom is a poor reflection of what happens in the world, and only infrequently do people ever become as automatic or fluent in their L2 as in their mother tongue, where words have a mobility and elasticity almost of their own. In Kramsch's (1993, 246) reflections on language pedagogy, she sums up this divergence: "Rather than doing things with words, speaking a foreign language is making do with a limited amount of someone else's words. That, not unlimited speech acts, is the reality of the language classroom." The EFL classroom context has limits, and to fight against them is useless. A teacher can instead work within them, shape them, refine them, and exploit them for her purposes—to help learners grow and progress in their acquisition of a new language.

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