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# The attitudes of English teachers about the use of L1 in the teaching of L2

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## Abstract

The place of L1 has been an argument in ELT history for ages. While one side such as Situational language teaching and Audio Lingual method see L1 as a block before learning L2 and strictly avoid using the native tongue in language teaching, on the other side the humanistic and communicative methodologies consider using L1 as a reference and believe in the contribution of the native language in the acquisition of the target language. This paper reviews the literature on using L1 in the teaching of L2 and by analyzing the attitudes of English teachers in the use of L1, comments on the findings from the interviews. The research concludes that ELT teachers in this study emphasize the necessary use of L1 in structural teaching and prefer the "teach English in English" motto in communicative teaching in general. Also the research shows the specific ways ELT teachers prefer using L1, which breaks the psychological barriers before the teaching begins and that the use of L1 creates a low anxiety atmosphere for both the learners and the teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

*"My mother tongue, so sweet the sound,*

*How dear you are to me!*

*Were my heart made of stone or steel,*

*To speak it proud I'd be."*

As expressed in the poetry above by Klaus Groth (2009), how we feel better using or how we express ourselves well is the mother tongue, or in terms of language teaching the first language (L1), which has always been a discussion in language teaching. The debate begins from the very strict opinion that it prevents learners from acquiring the target language and ends with the opposing idea that L1 is the verification of learning the target language. English language teaching (ELT) history has witnessed many arguments for and against the use of L1.

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The former theory judges the L1 as the main reason for the learning of an L2 while in practice teachers of English - even still today- have faced the dilemma of allowing, limiting or forbidding the use L1 in their classrooms.

Despite the ease of the theoretical assumptions, the practical realities of the classroom have compelled the methodologist to conduct new studies and reassess the use of L1 in ELT literature. Is an English teacher trying to give the impression that he or she does not know the L1 in spite of the fact that he or she is the native speaker of that language like the ugly duckling trying to be a part of the other family? Is the student's behavior in not using L1 burying all of their L1 world knowledge and potential? Should the bilingual teacher act as a monolingual person to prevent his or her learners' use of L1 in the classroom? The answers should prove the theory if the results were what we call "success".

Modernism and the democratic movement in the world have moved from behaviorism to cognitive belief; strictness against the use of L1 is decreasing in the classroom. Many course books today have included the use of L1 in their syllabus. This theory is also more humanistic accepting that L1 brings some wealth and richness in thinking and acquiring the other language. "Always English" has become "Teach English in English but do not ignore the native language."

Turkish teachers of English language have been very little affected by these changes both in theory and practice since the beginning of the century. There are teachers entirely depending on the use of L1 or totally refusing it. There are still teachers following the structural approach, and reform minded teachers do not appear to be rapidly replacing them.

This study, stemming from the experiences above, attempts to investigate the attitudes of teachers on using L1 in the teaching of English. It first reviews the literature then gives the methodology and describes the subjects and then concludes by commenting on the findings and giving further recommendations.

## **2. The case for and against L1 in ELT: A Brief Account**

The first and the most traditional language teaching method is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which totally depends on the use of the first language in the teaching of the target language. "The use of L1 is almost tantamount to the emergence times of GTM because sentences had to be translated from the target language (L2) back to the students' first language (L1) and vice versa" (Harmer, 2007, p.63). The methods developed under the influence of behaviorism strictly refused the use of L1 as one of the principles of The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching.

*"The target language is the language of the classroom"* (Richards and Rodgers 2002, page 39)

The Audio-lingual Method, the American twin of The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching, also rejects the use of L1 in the L2 classroom by advocating that use of L2 in the learning of the target language is more effective if everything is taught in the target language. And this method avoids the use of L1 at all costs as it argues that it would cause the formation of bad habits and interfere in the teaching of L2. Because it is a 'focus on behavior control method', Harmer sees it as the methodology banishing all forms of language processing including the use or referencing of L1. (Harmer, 2001)

From those practices sternly forbidding L1 there emerge other traditional methodologies with different levels of tolerance toward the use of L1. The use of L1 in the other traditional methods ranges from using it to give instructions as in the Silent Way, to explain the dialogue in Suggestopedia, to increase learner's security in Community Language Learning or to reasonable use in Communicative Language Teaching.

As explained in this brief history the first method is excessive on the use of L1, depending much on its use, while on the other side the following language innovators advocate that it should be kept outside the class. The softeners

(more humanistic and cognitive linguists) strive to find the middle ground by asserting that there should be a limit to the use of L1 in the teaching of an L2.

### 3. The current case of L1 use in ELT

Following the methodological elucidations on language teaching, eyes turned to the individual linguists and practitioners. Although we can observe some linguists such (Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1982; Macdonald, 1993) strongly advocate the use of the target language in the classroom for the sake of comprehensible input, according to Cook et al.(1979) the learning of a first language is not simply a matter of learning syntax and vocabulary; rather it is environmental and linguistic as well as emotional. Thus ignoring one's L1 would decrease the cognitive level of that learner. Swan believes that when learning a new language learners habitually attempt to find ways to comprehend the new structures in the L2 by trying to find the equivalents in their L1. (Swan, 1985:96). This is the very logical rationale for taking the L1 reference. Atkinson (1993) supports the use of L1 at and in appropriate times and ways. He argues the teacher should find a balance and decide if the use of L1 is excessive or not.

Auerbach (1993), after introducing the very interesting idea that forcing people to use an L2 violates human rights, states that the use of L2 in the classroom is a prime example of Fairclough's notion of covert ideological control. This point of view is of great interest because it describes an implicit way of forcing people to use the target language which may aim to break one's ties with his or her native language and its culture. Quoting this view is not meant as an attack on L2 use but a part of analyzing the case in all its aspects.

The American Pledge below perhaps is an example of an acting point or the political ideology to keep the use of L2 in language classrooms. Auerbach (1993) uses this oath as evidence to support the notion of ideological control or the Americanization movement.

#### “Pledge for Children

I love the United States of America. I love my country's flag. I love my country's language. I promise:

1. That I will not dishonor my country's speech by leaving off the last syllables of words.
2. That I will say a good American "yes" and "no" in place of an Indian grunt "um-hum" and "nupum" or a foreign "ya" or "yeh" and "nope."
3. That I will do my best to improve American speech by avoiding loud, rough tones, by enunciating distinctly, and by speaking pleasantly, clearly, and sincerely.
4. That I will learn to articulate clearly as many words as possible during the year.” (Bailey, 2006)

Following the same ideology Phillipson claims that an English-only attitude ignores the learner's language knowledge, fails to understand the nature of bilingualism and psycholinguistically ignores first-language learning experiences as the foreign-language learner is expected to start with no existing language resources.(Quoted from Higereda et al.,2009). Harmer (2007, pp. 133-134) also believes that L1 use encourages interaction between teacher and students at a basic level, allows learners to talk about learning, and enhances the social atmosphere in the classroom.( Quoted from Higereda et al., 2009 p.44). Atkinson (1987) is seen one of the first supporters of L1 use in L2 classrooms. He criticizes the gap in the ELT literature on the beneficial use of L1.and defines a suggested use of L1 in the EFL classroom.

Table 1. Suggested Uses for L1 in the EFL Classroom

1.	<b>Eliciting Language</b> "How do you say 'X' in English?"
2.	<b>Checking comprehension</b> "How do you say 'I've been waiting for ten minutes in Spanish?'" (Also used for comprehension of a reading or listening text.)
3.	<b>Giving complex instructions to basic levels</b>
4.	<b>Co-operating in groups</b> Learners compare and correct answers to exercises or tasks in the L1. Students at times can explain new points better than the teacher.
5.	<b>Explaining classroom methodology at basic levels</b>
6.	<b>Using translation to highlight a recently taught language item</b>
7.	<b>Checking for sense</b> If students write or say something in the L2 that does not make sense, have them try to translate it into the L1 to realize their error.
8.	<b>Testing</b> Translation items can be useful in testing mastery of forms and meanings.
9.	<b>Developing circumlocution strategies</b> When students do not know how to say something in the L2, have them think of different ways to say the same thing in the L1, which may be easier to translate.

Some research exists on the use of L1 in a foreign/second language classroom. The very early study conducted by Patti (1994) asking 21 college teachers their attitudes on L1 use showed that 71 % reported that all ESL teachers at the college should know and use some L1( in the study L1 is Spanish) and a quick use of L1 would save time. In Hosoda's research he found that the teacher switches to L1 when students fail to give appropriate answers (Hosoda, 2000, p.86 quoted from Birch 2010 p.20.) Liskin and Gasparro (2011) mention that Macaro presents the findings of two studies on codeswitching and vocabulary acquisition and he concluding that there is no evidence pointing to any negative effects of codeswitching.

Brooks, Donato, and McGlone (1997 quoted from Scott. and Fuente,2008) observed that communication problems were often resolved when learners reverted to L1. Tomlinson (2000) stressed the importance of the inner voice in L2 learning. His findings indicated that L2 learners make use of an L1 inner voice, often failing to develop an L2 inner voice. In their research Scott and Fuente (2008) conducted a study on 12 students (half studying Spanish, the other half studying French) asking the first half to use L2 and the second to use both L1 and L2 when trying to understand grammar rules. The findings from this study indicated that learners use L1 even when they appear to be operating exclusively in the L2. And what's more interesting is that exclusive use of the L2 during this type of task appears to inhibit collaborative interaction, hinder the use of metatalk, and impede "natural" learning strategies. Anton and DiCamilla (1998, quoted in Mouhanna, 2009) conducted a study in which L1 was found to contribute to scaffolding and increase learners' interest in demanding reasoning tasks. Myojin's (2007)'s study on L1 use in listening skills shows that using L2 is helpful in improving their listening comprehension skills. Her study concentrates only on the listening skill comprehension in L2 depending on only one variable whether teachers use L1 or L2 during listening sessions, but it does not mention the support of L1 in the cognitive development of other aspects of L2 acquisition.

#### **4.The Research Method and the Participants**

The study was conducted among twelve English teachers at twelve different primary schools in Balikesir, Turkey. All of the teachers are Turkish and have a significant experience. The majority were female. The teachers were interviewed about the use of L1 in their classes. Pseudonyms were used for the teachers. No theoretical questions were directed to the teachers in the interview. The question was a neutral one: 'What is the place of L1 in your teaching?' The idea was to get their thoughts and see if they would comply with the findings in the literature. The data from the interviews were collected and analyzed. The evaluation of the interviews was commented on and discussed in the last part of the study.

## Result

The teachers in the study asserted that more communicative skills require the least use of L1. If an activity is more including interactional-based than structural, both learners and the teacher rely on the target language. They also stated that the physical condition of the classroom is the reason for using L1; crowded classes force the teachers to use the first language to instruct and control the learners. Another reason is that the education system is based on preparing for the examinations. Teachers reported receiving requests from both learners and parents to instruct students in their L1 because the result-based examinations do not entail the use of the target language. In support of this view teacher Gabriel stated that it would be nonsense to talk about the use of L1 while one is still using the Grammar Translation as the method in one's teaching.

The existence of the course material allows either the use of L1 or L2, stated another teacher. If he or she doesn't have enough course material he or she uses L1. Material in this sense should be understood to be any kind of course supplements that will facilitate the use of L2 in the classroom. Lack of interest in the course also encourages the teacher to use L1 to energize the students. Teacher Rosa reported that to get the students come back to the classroom she switches to L2. The teacher Amanda feels the necessity to use L1 when the students seem to lose their self-confidence. Another felt the need to depend on L1 in the teaching of the abstract vocabulary. Additional reasons were to check for comprehension and to explain the activity.

Only one teacher out of the twelve said she never uses L1 in her teaching because she believes that overuse of L1 is making the students lazy. She believes that when students switch to their native language they are neither cognitive nor analytic in understanding the target language.

## 4. Conclusion

All in all L1 cannot neither be ignored nor overused in language classrooms. The teachability of the subject is a good rationale for the use of L1. As seen in the findings it is evident that the reason for using L1 in the classroom is mostly a methodological issue; teachers in fact do not take their support from the theory but from their experiences and perceptions. Pedagogical training for pre- and in- service teachers is seen inevitable in teacher training courses and faculties. Teachers were observed to be using the native language not for the acceptable reasons explained in the literature. This is due to the lack of ELT methodology. The other side is certainly supported by other studies and researchers arguing that a person is more himself if addressed in his own language as Mandela's famous quote on negotiating states: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart." The richness of a learner's L1 knowledge and experience is unquestionably an accessible source for L2 learning. Teaching a learner without his native language is not only disregards his or her identity and culture but also turns him or her into new born baby with an adult mind.

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