

L1 in the classroom: Keep Your Friends Close

by Saidaly Ibarra

Throughout language teaching history, the students' mother tongue (L1) has played different roles. It has been labeled the "backbone" of the learning process and exclusive medium of instruction by supporters of the Grammar Translation Method, the "intruder" to blame for the learners' mistakes by supporters of approaches like the Audio-Lingual Method, or nowadays just something to avoid wherever possible in the Communicative Method. Today, for many teachers, using their students' L1 is out of the question because they work for institutions with official monolingual policies, it represents a source of guilt because it is a "taboo" issue among their colleagues, it is seen as a badge of low status because it draws attention to the fact that the teacher is not a native speaker, or it is regarded simply as a way to save time.

Such is the prevailing status of the L1 in the language teaching community. However, it is undeniable that resorting to the learners' L1 is, for the students, something natural and innate, since their L1 is the system through which they already think, understand the world around them and communicate. And so they use it. Teachers may ban the L1 from the lesson, but they cannot do so from their students' minds. Accordingly, the L1 should not only be accepted but welcomed as a valuable asset that learners bring to the language classroom, and should be wisely exploited. In doing so, two aspects should be borne in mind: First, both learners and teachers must be aware of the reasons why they use the L1, that is, to do it methodically and with a clear pedagogical purpose. Second, a good balance must be kept between this and other resources not to turn the foreign language classroom into a translation one.

Let us take a look at an example: learning and teaching lexical items. As already mentioned, adult learners rely on what they already know of the world; therefore, when dealing with new lexical items, they unavoidably turn to their L1. Whether banned or not, it is extremely normal for them to make use of learning strategies where they engage in L1-English associations such as making bilingual vocabulary lists, asking their peers for a "translation" of a given word, or taking notes in L1, among others. In short, language learners already know the lexical system they use to name the world around them and do not need to reconceptualize it. However, and at the same time, there may be many lexical items with no L1 equivalent, or where the L1 has a slightly different meaning, or where the expanding/enriching process of lexical development is done without reference back to L1 (for example with work on collocations or key phrases). In other words, both an L1/English and an English-only approach are common. When it comes to teaching, teachers can also take both approaches. They may either take a bilingual approach (translation, alerting students to false friends, bilingual dictionary use, discussing meaning through the medium of L1), or a monolingual approach in English (monolingual definitions, context, eliciting with concept questions and mimes, etc). Both approaches are equally valid, and effective for different purposes. A teacher can move flexibly between them. However, there seems to be

a taboo or a misconception around the bilingual approach. Some teachers believe resorting to the L1 delays the acquisition of lexical items, while those who timidly resort to the L1 for teaching vocabulary do it inconsistently, without a teaching purpose, or regarding it as a “way out” when all other techniques prove ineffective.

Contrary to these beliefs and attitudes, there are a number of advantages in exploiting the L1 when teaching lexical items. I once had the opportunity to observe several sessions of an English course where the teacher would frequently resort to the L1. For instance, he had the learners talking in small groups and, while monitoring the activity, he provided the learners with the English words or chunks they did not know and asked him in Spanish. By the end of such activities, he had generated a list in English that included every lexical item he had been asked for. He would then go through this list with the whole class in English, as feedback. This stage involved the teacher and students engaging in interesting and enriching discussions on the ways in which both languages differ, and revolved around a broad variety of issues that included morphological differences and the cultural load of certain words.

Paradoxically, these techniques made the learners less dependent on the L1. The fact that the teacher only made notes on the board in English gave a major emphasis on the acquisition of the English words and made it clear that he would resort to the L1 only as an assisting tool which by no means would become the main language in the classroom. This technique also had a positive effect on the learners’ fluency: on the one hand, when used during the speaking activities the occasional use of a question about language in L1 greatly reduced their stress at facing the new language items (they could just ask for a word and it was given); on the other hand, their metalinguistic discussions in English at the feedback stage provided an opportunity for further oral production through a meaningful and relevant subject (namely, the use of English language). These feedback discussions called for more complicated language at all levels (lexical, grammatical, syntactic and even pragmatic) and accelerated their learning.

The range of activities that exploit the L1 in the foreign language classroom is vast, and goes way beyond simply giving the L2 for individual L1 words. It can include: teaching the proper use of bilingual dictionaries, extending concepts by comparing the cultural load of certain words, reverse translating (L1 → L2 → back to L1 again to gain insight into L1 interference), using bilingual texts to observe lexical and syntactic similarities and differences, translating short but pragmatically rich excerpts, and many others. Such activities cover a wide scope of language teaching aspects that go beyond language skills and help learners improve their foreign language competence by raising grammar, discourse, sociolinguistic and cultural awareness. Furthermore, bilingual techniques are not dependent on the level of the learners; just as we do with authentic texts, such activities can be adapted to the level, the needs, the language and the interests of the learners, and they can even be carried out where the teacher does not know the L1 of the learners, or in multi-cultural classrooms.

Our mother tongue is the key to learning other languages. To ban our learner's L1 from the foreign language classroom not only deprives us of one of the richest teaching resources we have at our disposal, but is also fruitless, since resorting to L1 represents a natural need and impulse for every language learner. Thus, I would advise those teachers who so fiercely reject the use of the L1 in the language classroom because they regard it as an enemy: 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.' It is only by observing, studying, and exploiting our interfering enemies that we can defeat them. You might even find that, far from being an enemy, the learner's L1 is, in fact, one of our best allies in the teaching-learning process.

BIODATA

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