

The Role of the L1 in the L2 Classroom

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The use of the L1 in L2 classrooms has historically been a controversial issue. Research over the years has greatly influenced the perspectives of the L1 and its purposes in the L2 classroom. In this paper, I will review the traditional views of L1 usage in the L2 classroom as well as discuss the major research studies which have brought new light upon the L1 and its influences on L2 acquisition. The focus of this paper will then shift to the pedagogical implications of such findings and how these findings affect my decisions as a teacher with respect to L1 usage in my classroom.

L1 HINDERS L2

Traditionally the use of L1 in the L2 classroom was long regarded as a hindrance to L2 acquisition. Lado (1957) and Fries (1954), as proponents of Contrastive Analysis, claimed that L1 impeded accurate L2 production and therefore, was detrimental to L2 learning. Within the classrooms, errors were frowned upon and teachers often used the formula $L2-L1 = \text{syllabus}$ to develop their curriculum. As practice of the Audio-Lingual Method rose, tolerance of errors in the L2 fell and the consensus in language education was that errors needed to be eradicated. It was believed that only error-free production indicated accurate production and therefore, flawless L2 was the goal that many teachers had for their students.

L1 = L2

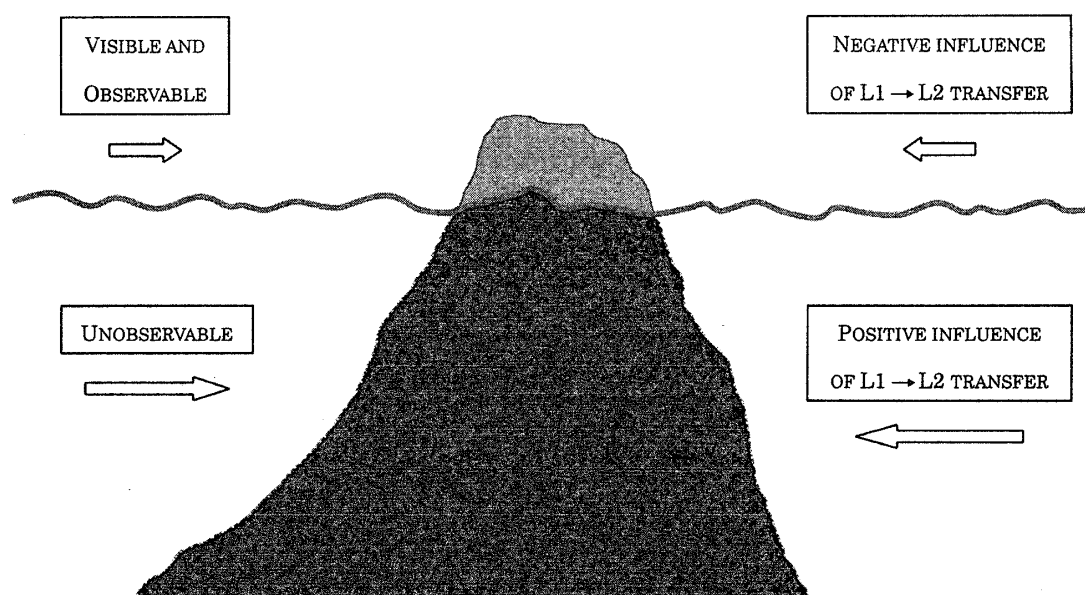
Chomsky's linguistic theory, however, proposed other views (Chomsky, 1965). His view of an "ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community" posited that grammar was universal and each person possessed linguistic competence within his or her own brain. His followers in SLA hypothesized that, since universals governed language acquisition, there was no need to regard the L1 negatively (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982). L2 acquisition would occur as a result of the LAD present in learners, and this process would not be hindered by L1 factors. Studies by Dulay and Burt (1974), Cazden (1972), and Ervin-Tripp (1974) showed that the order of acquisition of the L2 was very similar to that of the L1. This similarity brought the L1 into a new light. If these routes of acquisition were so similar, what did this imply about the errors made in the L2? Could such errors tell us more about the ac-

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quisition of the L2 ?

L1 INTERACTS WITH L2

Pit Corder proposed that errors were not necessarily evidences of non-learning but rather evidences of learning (1967, 1971). Although errors appeared to be evidence of negative transfer, studies such as Dulay and Burt (1974), Gillis and Weber (1976), White (1977) and LoCoco (1975, 1976) showed that, generally, the nonphonological errors made by language learners were widely due to factors other than those relating to the L1. Such findings caused researchers and instructors to reconsider the role of the L1 in second language acquisition. Language deviance was traditionally regarded as an indication of negative language transfer, or interference. The idea of positive transfer was not widely considered due to the "lack of evidence" of it. However, it is logical to say that, interference was only apparent because it was observable in a learner's performance. The inability to observe positive language transfer did not necessarily preclude its existence. Ringbom and Palmberg's (1976) studies of Finns and Swedes learning English revealed that positive transfer was evident. Kellerman (1979) also addressed positive language transfer in his U-Shaped Theory. According to this theory, beginners experience a great deal of positive language transfer at the outset of their language acquisition process where few errors are evident. At the intermediate level, the occurrence of errors in-

Figure 1.1 CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE

creases, seemingly indicating a regression in acquisition. As learners advance, error frequency once again is reduced resulting in a U-shaped pattern of behavior, implying that positive transfer does occur in language learning.

The idea of cross-linguistic influence suggests that more investigation needs to be made about the “unobservable” transfer (positive) that occurs when learners attempt to acquire another language. [see Figure 1.1]

L1 IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

The changing perspectives of the role of L1 in L2 acquisition give way to some important pedagogical implications to us as teachers. If research stands to support L1 as a positive influence on L2 acquisition, how can this positive influence be cultivated to facilitate L2 study and acquisition? For every observable incident of negative transfer (error), one might speculate there being numerous unobservable incidents of positive transfer. Research suggests that such transfer might be a possible resource to aid learners, rather than a hindrance to them in their study of another language.

Such research has caused me, personally, to rethink my view of L1 in the L2 classroom and its potential contributions to the learning environment created in my classroom. I believe a purposeful role for L1 can be established in the L2 classroom to benefit those learning there.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to discuss how each language, L1 and L2, effectively contribute to the learning environment of my classroom and how awareness of their contributions can greatly enhance the learning my students are engaged in.

Before addressing the role of L1 in my classroom, I would first like to briefly describe the role of the L2 in my classroom. Currently I am teaching English as a Foreign Language at a Japanese National University. I do not share an L1 with my students and am very limited in Japanese and so I do not use my students L1 very often in class. However, while living in the United States, I taught elementary and intermediate French and Spanish at a small liberal arts university in Arkansas. In this case, I shared the same L1 with the students, and so, I made great efforts to consistently use the L2 in the classroom. I made such efforts to maximize the learners' exposure of the L2, as they were studying foreign languages, rather than second languages. In my classroom, the L2 was used whenever an opportunity for meaningful exchange presented itself. At the beginning level, I used the L2 to give most directions and simple explanations. I also used it to review contextualized vocabulary and to discuss literature or culture. I did not use the L1 100% of the time, but I gradually decreased my usage throughout the year, and increased my usage of the L2, as the learners progressed in their language competency. At the intermediate level, I used the L2 85-90% of the time to provide my learners in-

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creased opportunities to interact with the language. I did not require my learners to use the L2 at either level, however, I did encourage them to use it by conducting activities in the L2. Again, the "basic rule" for L2 usage was whenever the opportunity for meaningful exchange arose.

As previously stated, I did not require my students to speak only in the L2, nor did I adhere to absolute use of it myself. However, the alternate use of the L1 and L2 in my classroom was not a haphazard nor random switching of codes. Although the language used in my classroom was predominantly L1, I did reserve the right for my learners and I to use the L1 whenever such usage contributed to overall learning of the L2. The use of the L1 should not be incidental, but rather systematic. The purposeful use of the L1 can prove beneficial in helping learners socially, metacognitively, and cognitively (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998).

Socially, the use of the L1 can contribute to building a community of learners, creating solidarity within the learning environment. I often used the L1 with the students before class began to continue building a rapport with them. They often used the L1 in class for this purpose, particularly when I was using the L2 for a classroom discussion (i.e. literary or cultural). The L1 flourished among them as they attempted to answer questions in the L2. Their L1 usage to support, encourage, and "rescue" one another created definite solidarity.

Metacognitively, I found L1 use beneficial at the beginning of courses to facilitate learner training. When both students and teacher engaged in discussions and activities in the L1 to raise learner awareness, L2 learning overall seemed to profit. These activities and discussions sometimes carried over into the L2, as competency permitted.

Cognitively, students had an opportunity to use the L1 when I gave directions or explained complicated grammar structures in the L1. This was often necessary due to time constraints. If a task or activity was planned where complicated instructions were given, it was more practical to use the L1 in order to permit sufficient time for the activity itself. In such situations, use of the L1 worked to maximize the use of the L2.

Learners may also make use of the L1 during activities such as brainstorming in small groups for literary or cultural discussion. I allowed them to review the questions to be asked and gave them an opportunity to review the content of the answers in the L1. This review also gave them a chance to determine how these answers might be given in the L2. As a group generating language, their awareness was raised to the fact that one idea may be expressed in a variety of ways. This technique also worked to "lower the affective filter" (Krashen, 1982) and create solidarity among the learners.

Although usage appears to be "permitted" at times by the teacher, there are occasions when cognitive use of the L1 can neither be permitted nor forbidden. The L1 plays a major

role in the ongoing thought processes as the L2 is taken in. Avoidance and borrowing rarely occur without L1 "usage". Usage may not always be observable. Although, input and output may assume the L2, cognitive processes are very likely to occur in the L1.

In my experience as a teacher, I have observed that the L1 can be used effectively to maximize L2 study and acquisition. If learning is a process by which a student moves from the known to the unknown, it stands to reason that purposeful use of the L1 can greatly enhance such learning. The key factor in determining L1 use must be context. Teachers must be conscious of who, what, when, where, and how when deciding to use the L1. Central to these decisions must be the learner. In each context, the teacher must respond to the learner according to that learner's needs and determine how the teacher may best facilitate the student's access to the L2. L1/L2 use must be determined by thoughtful decisions, not haphazard code switching. Such careful thought will prove to be beneficial to L2 learning overall. However, realistically, teachers are faced with literally hundreds of split second decisions each day, as learners interact with each other, with their teachers, and with the L1 and L2. To expect a conscious decision each time the opportunity for L1 or L2 arises is unrealistic. We may not always be consistent with our convictions. However, the raising of our awareness of the cross-linguistic influences of L1 and the inherent benefits thereof, can only enable us as teachers to plan more thoughtful responses to our learners, leaving our intuitive decisions more reflective of our overall goal for our students: the effective study and acquisition of their second language.

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