

The Use of Students' First Language (L1) in the Second Language (L2) Classroom

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The issue of the use of students' first language (L1) in the second language (L2) classroom has been debated for many years. Steven Krashen, with his Natural Approach to language acquisition, proposed that students learn their second language much in the same way that they learn their first, and that L2 is best learned through massive amounts of exposure to the language with limited time spent using L1 (Tang, 2002). However, in recent years, focus has been shifting towards inclusion of L1 in the language classroom. Research has shown that the occasional use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Wells, 1999).

Teacher use of L1

Teachers often use L1 in beginning and intermediate classes to:

- give instructions
- explain meanings of words
- explain complex ideas
- explain complex grammar points (Tang, 2002)

Many teachers find that the use of some L1 provides more time to practice L2 because understanding is achieved much more rapidly. The key with teacher use of L1 is that it be used for clarification purposes, after an attempt has been made to communicate ideas in L2 and students still appear to be confused. The idea is that L1 serves a "supportive and facilitating role in the classroom" (Tang, 2002), and not that it is the primary language of communication. L1 use also allows students to become more aware of the similarities and differences between cultures and linguistic structures, and thus

may improve the accuracy of translations. Finding cognates and similarities between languages builds up "interlinked L1 and L2 knowledge in the students' minds" (Cook, 2001).

Student use of L1

Students often use L1 when doing pair work to construct solutions to linguistic tasks and evaluate written language. The use of L1 allows them to work within their Zone of Proximal Development, as proposed by Vygotsky (Wells, 1999). By working in pairs and using L1 intermittently with L2, students may be cognitively processing at a higher level with regard to linguistic tasks than if they were limited only to communicating in the language they are trying to learn. L1 vocabulary allows learners to use language which they may not yet possess in L2 in order to process ideas and reach higher levels of understanding. This applies both to social talk between partners and private talk intended for the learner alone. Social talk, as the name implies, is talk between peers for the purpose of conversing. Private talk is when learners talk themselves through a learning process. For example, in private talk, they might utter a non-standard L2 phrase and then self-correct: "No, wait, ... (L2 phrase corrected)." Private talk can also be used to deconstruct grammar in real-time as the speaker is using it, such as: "I like the milk...the milk? No, I like milk." However, it is important to point out that students who use L1 for communicative purposes in the classroom must also be expected to use L2 in the classroom to practice its use.

Students use L1 while speaking in order to:

- ask each other clarifying questions
- express frustrations concerning their lack of understanding

- clarify meaning of words in L2
- find new words in L2 which correspond to already known words in L1
- use language to process complex concepts
- build shared meaning while evaluating written tasks through shared discussion

L1 use in written tasks is especially valuable because it helps to clarify and build meaning. It allows learners to repeatedly evaluate and clarify communication with regard to choice of content and register appropriate to the task (Wells, 1999). This re-evaluation is often done orally, in conversation with a peer or teacher or in private talk.

Collaborative dialogue allows learners to build linguistic understanding concerning a number of language tasks. As Cook stated in her article "Using the First Language in the Classroom" (2001), "L1 provides scaffolding for the students to help each other."

L1 with respect to cultural and linguistic identity

Student attitude toward learning L2 greatly impacts their learning experience as well as the quantity and purpose of their L1 use in the classroom. Students who are forced to learn a language they do not identify with or find to be relevant will be more likely to overuse L1 to stay within their area of comfort. Many students find the exclusion of their mother tongue to be degrading to that tongue (Tang, 2002). On the other hand, if students feel that their home language is a valuable part of the language learning process, they are less likely to feel resentful about learning a second language.

Conclusion

The use of L1 in the L2 classroom by both teachers and students can be beneficial in the language learning process and may even be necessary for increased comprehension and acceptance of the new language by the language learners. This use of L1 is for

clarifying purposes and should not be the primary mode of communication either by the students or teacher(s) in the L2 classroom. Once an appropriate balance is achieved, the use of L1 will enhance an L2 classroom.

References

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