

THE ROLE AND SCOPE OF L1 IN ELT METHODOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF EFL / ESL

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Abstract: *This paper explores the benefits and purposes of utilizing the first language in ELT methodology in the context of EFL / ESL. It exemplifies how the L1 can be effectively used for various teaching contexts, and provides systematic stages for implementing the use of L1. First, a review of literature in the relevant area shows strong justifications for and against the use of L1 in language pedagogy. However, most recent researches advocates the use of L1, highlighting its numerous benefits and purposes. Next, this paper examines the various teaching contexts for the use of L1. After that, it discusses various teaching methods through which the L1 can be integrated in the L2 classroom. Finally, it delineates three systematic stages for practically implementing the L1 in the second language classroom. It concludes that a judicious, controlled and systematic use of L1 can be a potent facilitating tool in the EFL / ESL classroom.*

Keywords: *EFL, ELT, ELT Methodology, ESL, L1, L2*

1. Introduction

The role and scope of L1 (Mother Tongue) in the context of EFL and ESL has long been a controversy. In this context, Stern (1992, p.279) concluded that the role of L1 in teaching FL/SL is 'one of the most long-standing controversies in the history of language pedagogy'. Proponents advocating the elimination of L1 argue that the monolingual approach would provide maximum exposure to L1. The target language is best learned and taught through the language itself (Howatt, 1984; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Maximum exposure to L2 and minimum exposure to L1 are crucial, and the use of L1 may interfere with the L2 learning process (Cook, 2001; Krashen, 1981).

In contrast, those favoring the use of L1 are of the view that it can be judiciously used for most classroom activities like explaining complex ideas, checking understanding, learning grammatical rules, new vocabulary items or dealing with cross-cultural issues. Nation (2003) and Larsen-Freeman (2012) suggested that students' L1 should never be entirely prohibited from FL/SL classes and argued that a judicious use for controlled and specific purposes can bear positive results. Trends in ELT methodology reveal that the monolingual approach could not uphold its authority and there has always been opposition and debate (Macaro, 1997; Auerback, 1993). In this context, Macaro (2009) emphasized on three points of view with respect to the role and scope of L1 being used in the L2 classroom: (1) Virtual position – it refers to the exclusive monolingual use of L2 which reinforces the idea that there is no pedagogical or communicative merit in the learners' L1 at all, (2) Optimal position- it advocates the controlled and judicious use

of L1 for rectifications in meaning and structure of the target language, and (3) Maximal position- it believes in the notion that a few controlled and structured references may be allowed, but the target language can fundamentally be learnt only by its maximum use.

Literature on the topic shows that strong justifications exist for and against the use of L1 in the learning process of the target language. The advocates of using the first language contends that teachers frequently use code switching between L1 and L2 to communicate comprehensively to the students of the second language and such methodology is natural as it takes place in real-life situations, especially in the context of bilinguals when they are speaking to someone of their native language and who might also understand the second language of the speaker (Macaro, 2009). In addition, various researches have also emphasized that the use of L1 in L2 classrooms is acquiring significant popularity (Cook, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Anton & Di Camilla, 1998). This popularity is due to its role as cognitive and mediating learning tool (Polio, 1990; Moore, 2002; Macaro, 2009; Crawford, 2004). Another reason or the growing popularity of L1 is the support and positive attitudes from teachers as well as students who perceive the role of L1 as an aiding, simplifying, enabling and negotiating tool in the context of teaching and learning the L2 (Macaro, 2001; Rolin- Ianziti & Brownlie, 2002; Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Flyman-Mattsson & Burenhult, 2009).

On the other hand, proponents advocating the elimination of L1 argue that the target language acquisition and thinking is negatively affected by the students' thinking in their mother tongue which acts like a crutch that needs to be disposed of as early as possible for best L2 learning outcome (Weschler, 1997). Furthermore, Weschler (1997) also emphasizes that over-dependence on L1 can result in fossilization of intra-language which will neither be L1 nor L2, and the use of L1 is a drain on students' as well as teachers' resources which can be better utilized on learning the target language. In addition, Cook (2001) contends that it is essential for the learners of L2 to differentiate between and keep the L1 and the L2 as different entities for the successful acquisition of the target language. Thus, the perennial debate of language pedagogy of whether the L1 should be used in the teaching and learning of L2, finds its proponents both for and against the cause. The debate gets even more crucial and significant in the context of EFL / ESL.

2. Literature Review

Numerous researches in second language acquisition (SLA) confirm the fact that the L1 of the learner plays a very crucial role in the process of learning the second language. Investigations in the field of inter-language and language transfer carried out by a significant number of researchers reveals the crucial impact of the L1 on the learning process of the L2. Learners use the linguistic knowledge of their L1 to construct and learn the target language. Such reasons provide strong justification and theoretical evidence to advocate the case of the use of L1. To reiterate, Ellis (2008) contends that in the process of acquiring the target language, learners have

a tendency to construct interim rules by utilizing the knowledge of their first language. He also claims that learners tend to think in their first language and then translate their ideas to the target language. Furthermore, Krashen (1982) is also of the view that the surface structure of the L1 has a formidable influence on the surface structure of the second language. Another proponent of L1 use, Cook (1992) claims that while processing the L2, learners usually access their first language. He suggests teachers not to ignore the L1 as otherwise it can isolate learners. The first language is ingrained permanently in the mind of the learners, whether the teachers use it or not. Further, Auerbach (1993) claims that “L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners’ lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English” (p.19).

On the other hand, there are equally strong justifications against the use of L1 in teaching the target language. There are numerous researches which found empirical evidence of the negative impact of using L1 in teaching L2. Consequently, they advocate the monolingual approach in the teaching of the target language. They further emphasize that the overuse of the first language minimizes learners’ exposure to the target language (Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). In addition to this, Lightbown & Spada (1999) argues that the basic sources of errors in the learning process of L2 are transmitted from the patterns of the L1. Moreover, the notion of ‘comprehensible input’ and ‘meaning’ put forward by Krashan & Terrel (1983) also requires optimum exposure to the target language. Nonetheless, innumerable later researches exemplify that although the monolingual approach received immense popularity for the impact of the above mentioned studies, it could not uphold its authority. These later researches empirically exemplify that the teaching of the target language is very arduous without some minimal use of L1. So, the complete elimination of L1 in the L2 classroom is not reasonable (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002). If learners are forbidden to use their L1 or compelled to use only the target language, especially at the elementary stage, it would create communication gaps which may lead to confusion and anxiety among them. Thus, learners may feel totally isolated, insecure and perplexed. Therefore, from the review of the relevant literature, it can be summarized that L1 cannot be completely eliminated from the pedagogy of language education.

3. Recent Trends in the Research of L1

In the recent two decades or so, a considerable shift is noticed globally towards the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. This tendency is a culmination of the realization of the benefits and purposes of utilizing the L1 in the L2 classroom. The realization of the benefits and purposes of utilizing the L1 has shifted the focus of the later researches to its productive use. These studies tend to focus on the following areas:

- a. Perception of teachers and students towards using L1 in their EFL/ESL classroom.
- b. Extent to which EFL/ESL teachers and students believe in the role of L1

- c. Frequency of teachers' use of L1 in EFL/ESL classroom
- d. Students' expectation of the frequency of the teachers' use of L1 in the L2 classroom.
- e. Situations / activities for which students and teachers employ the L1
- f. Ways and extent to which L1 can be utilized in the process of acquiring the EFL/ESL.

Researches by Tang (2002), Nation (2003), Macaro (2001) deals with classroom practices exploring the reasons and extent of L1 use by teachers and students in the teaching and learning process of L2. Similarly, perceptions and attitudes of teachers and students towards using L1 in the L2 classroom is investigated by Schweers (1999), Prodromou (2002), Dash (2002), Nazary (2008).

In the context of the benefits and purposes of L1, Wang & Wen (2002) exemplified that learners' use of L1 is not limited to practices like making sentences and learning vocabulary, but they also use L1 for their personal interactions during class hours. A similar research by Tang (2002) discovered that EFL instructors use L1 for the purposes of explaining meaning of difficult words and complex grammar ideas. The implication of his study revealed that an overwhelming majority of teachers (70%) favour the use of L1, as they can help learners comprehend difficult things and to support language learning activities in the classroom.

Macaro (2001) investigated the frequency and amount of L1 use in the actual classroom practice. He concluded that the use of L1 by teachers was occasional and minimal. Likewise, a research by Cook (2001) concluded that teachers as well as students have a tendency to use L1 as soon as they face difficulty in communication. A self-evaluation by Edstrom (2006) emphasizes the increased use of L2, but accepts the fact that L1 use at specific situations is his moral obligation, especially on occasions when the students are confused and incapable of moving forward with the L2.

A study by Al-Nofaie (2010) analyzed the beliefs and attitudes of teachers and students about the use of L1 in the context of Saudi Arabia. The findings of his study reveal that both teachers and students exhibited a positive attitude for the occasional use of L1. Another research by Macaro (2001) reiterated the conviction on the use of L2 to maximize learners' exposure to the target language. Nonetheless, it conceded that L1 could also be used for clarification on occasions when learners fail to comprehend specific things or to maintain class discipline.

Aqel (2006) in his study tried to know the attitude of teachers and students towards the use of L1 in the universities of Qatar. He too found a positive inclination towards the controlled use of the L1 (Arabic) in situations where it is necessary. Another interesting research by Nazary (2008) explored the case of Iran at university level. His study findings reveal that 85% students exemplify positive inclination for the use of L1 in the L2 classroom.

Thus, the last two decades of EFL/ESL research exemplify a significant inclination and positive attitude towards the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. These researches were focused on the productive benefits and the numerous purposes of utilizing the L1 in the target language classroom.

4. Utilizing the L1 for Various Teaching Contexts

The apparent reluctance of both teachers and students hampers the process of meaning utilization of the L1 in the L2 classroom. Therefore, it is imperative to raise awareness of teachers on how to utilize the L1 for various teaching contexts.

4.1 Concept Translation and Checking Understanding

Comprehending the various concepts of learning is very crucial part of the process of acquiring the second language, especially in the context of EFL/ESL. Lack of understanding key concepts serves as a significant impediment for language learning, especially in the elementary stage. Therefore, a judicious use of the L1 in translating basic concepts can serve as a facilitating tool for language learning and teaching. In addition, checking understanding of students is a crucial follow-up process for language teachers. Consequently, a controlled use of L1 is imperative to check learners' understanding of various items of language being taught in the L2 classroom. In addition, this would enable teachers to comprehend if and when learners require further reinforcement for various language items. Thus, the L1 plays the role of a significant tool for concept translation and checking understanding, enabling teachers to manage difficult situations in the context of EFL/ESL.

4.2 Conveying and Checking Meaning of Words or Sentences

L1 can be an enabling tool for teachers in the process of conveying and checking meaning of words, especially in the beginning stage of learners. A study by Franklin (1990) exemplified that 39% of language teachers utilize the L1 for conveying word and sentence meaning. This process identifies the crucial link of the two languages in the minds of the learners. Nonetheless, it does not automatically infer that all the meanings would be related to L1 as translation would not be able to provide the vocabulary and meaning of every L2 word in L1 (Johansson,1998). However, utilizing the L1 in the elementary stages of L2 learning may serve as an empowering tool, thereby constituting a natural environment for learning in the L2 classroom.

4.3 Teaching Grammar

In the conventional L2 classroom, explicit teaching of grammar has been discouraged. But in recent times, the focus has shifted to form as it naturally occurs during classroom practices rather than introducing it during the process of teaching (Long, 1991). Numerous researches have exemplified that even the advanced users of L2 are comparatively less proficient in acquiring information from L2 compared to their L1, and teachers find it difficult to explain grammar

through the medium of L2 (Polio & Duff, 1994; Macaro, 1997; Cook, 1997). Thus, the L1 can also be an effective tool for teaching grammar in the EFL/ESL classroom.

4.4 Utilizing L1 for Classroom Activities

Class activities are an integral part of the language learning process. Performing a class activity requires a thorough understanding by the learners of the teachers' instructions. Teachers may sometimes find it very difficult to communicate how a class activity needs to be carried out unless it is conveyed in L1. This perception is advocated by numerous researches which have exemplified that teachers frequently resort to L1 when they face impediments to conduct a class activity in L2 (Franklin, 1990; Polio & Duff, 1994; Macaro, 1997). The idea here is to enhance the proficiency level of EFL/ESL classes by using the L1 as a facilitating tool.

4.5 Effective Interaction between Students and Teachers

L1 can also be effectively utilized for interactions between teachers and students, including feedback, corrections, personal comments etc. A study by Macaro (1997) found that most of the English teachers try to furnish feedback to learners in L2. Nonetheless, it would be more pragmatic to provide feedback to a student on his performance in the L1, especially if it includes corrections in the recommended work (Franklin, 1990). In addition, it is also practically efficacious for teachers to resort to L1 to convey personal comments and feedback to learners. This would facilitate to build up a natural environment where learners are not presumed to be perfect users of the second language.

5. Teaching Methods Supporting L1 in the EFL/ESL Classroom

The effective integration of L1 in the teaching and learning process of EFL/ESL is very crucial. The reluctance of utilizing the L1 by both teachers and students hamper the entire process of meaning integration. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness of teachers to persuade them to actively utilize the L1 as a facilitating tool in the L2 classroom. The following teaching methods can effectively utilize the L1.

5.1 Community Language Learning

The L1 is inextricably connected to the L2 in the Community Language Learning (CLL) method. The L1 is utilized to initiate the meaning for L2 in complete sentences. Students are made to communicate to each other in the second language using the L1 as a mediator (Curran, 1976). It is a 3-step process:

Step 1- Learners are initiated to say something in their L1

Step 2- The teacher translates the uttered sentence into the L2

Step 3- The learner who uttered the sentence in L1 is instructed to repeat the same sentence in L2.

The translated sentence including grammar, structure and meaning is heard by all learners in the class. In course of time, as the students' progresses, the dependence from L1 to L2 translations are deliberately minimized by the teacher. Thus, the CLL method utilizes the L1 as a vehicle to transfer the meaning to the L2 sentences.

5.2 Dodson's Bilingual Method

Dodson's bilingual method was developed in 1967 as a counterpart of the audio-visual method. It makes use of the traditional 3P's: Presentation, Practice, Production. It utilizes 'interpretation' rather than 'translation' for the transfer of meaning. It is a 4-step process which proceeds as (Dodson, 1967):

Step 1- The teacher reads aloud a sentence in L2 several times and provides its meaning in L1

Step 2- The students repeat the sentence in L2 in chorus

Step 3- The students repeat the sentence in L2, individually

Step 4- The teacher tests the students' understanding of the meaning by uttering the sentence in L1 while pointing to a picture and asking the students to reproduce the same sentence in L2

The variation of this method with CLL is that unlike CLL, this method is initiated by the teacher. Thus, this method can be used as another tool to integrate the L1 into the L2 classroom.

5.3 New Concurrent Method

This method utilizes the parallel and simultaneous use of the L1 along with L2. In a study by Jacobson (1990), it was emphasized that in a L2 classroom the teacher has the freedom to switch from the L2 to L1 for concept translation, for enhancing the motivation level of learners, checking understanding of students or to praise/reprimand student behavior. The New Concurrent Method identifies the bilingualism of learners and believes that code switching is a natural activity. Learners are appreciated as genuine L2 users rather than treating them like native target language users. This method is a real-life replica where learners use both the L1 and L2 concurrently, and thereby it creates a natural learning environment for the L2 classroom.

6. Systematic Stages of Using L1 in the EFL/ESL Classroom

The EFL/ESL classroom is a specialized context. A restricted and systematic use of L1 can serve as a potent tool in teaching and learning the second language. The use of L1 can be systematized into 3 stages by EFL/ESL teachers.

Stage 1- Functional Use

In the functional stage, the use of L1 is sufficiently restricted whereby the teacher remains in control

- a. Learners are permitted to ask how to say something from their L1 in English. (Example- How do you say ...?)
- b. If learners have anything important to say but cannot express it in English, they can be granted permission to speak in their L1. (Example- Can I say something in my language?)
- c. The teacher can create some 'time out' sessions i.e. short sessions within the class to use the L1 by the learners. This is useful where specific things need to be discussed but could not be done in English.

Stage 2- Strategic Use

In the 2nd stage (Strategic Use), in addition to the uses of the 'functional use', the teacher encourages learners to make comparisons between the two languages. The teacher may or may not use the L1 himself/herself.

- a. The introduction of a new word can be compared to a word in the learners' L1. The teacher may ask, "Does it look like a word you know in your language?"
- b. The teacher may also ask students to identify patterns and similarities between their L1 and English. The teacher may inquire, "Is it similar or different in your language?" or "What is the equivalent in your language?"

Stage 3- Discourse Use

Stage 3 utilizes the L1 for higher level thinking skills, and to explore and comprehend the finer points of discourse in English.

- a. Discussing a phrase in context that has a specific degree of formality, the teacher may ask learners for an equivalent in their L1. This will trigger discussions on appropriacy and degree of formality.
- b. The teacher focuses on words and phrases which are mistranslated and thereby creates humorous situations. The teacher may emphasize on similar words and encourage students to similarly play with the language. Apart from 'comic relief', it will encourage creativity and language awareness.
- c. Working together, students translate short texts from one language to the other. They are encouraged to discuss and justify their choice of words and phrases. This will develop understanding of features of context, appropriacy & register, develop cognitive skills and promote greater awareness of both languages.

7. Conclusion

The role and scope of L1 in teaching a second language has always been a field of perennial debate in language pedagogy. A thorough review of literature exemplifies strong justifications for and against the use of L1 in language learning and teaching. However, recent trends in L1 research show significant shift towards the use of L1. Most researches in the area are now focused on the benefits and purposes of using the L1. Consequently, this study has discussed how the L1 can be utilized in various teaching contexts. It also provides various teaching methods for the effective use of L1. To persuade teachers to use the L1 as potent tool, this study provides a systematic 3-stage process i.e. functional use, strategic use, and discourse use. Thus, it can be concluded that a judicious, controlled and systematic use of L1 can be a potent facilitating tool in the EFL/ESL classroom. It has the potential to empower learners with insight into context, appropriacy, register, and develop cognitive skills and promote greater understanding of the target language, especially in the context of EFL/ESL.

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