

**Article information**

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Volume 10, Number 4 (2024)**ISSN: 2395-0595****The Role of the Mother Tongue in Second Language Classrooms: Historical Perspectives, Teacher and Student Attitudes, and Pedagogical Strategies****Nagah Emhemmed Othman***n.othman@zu.edu.ly*Zawia University, College of Education, Abi-Isa, English Department, Zawia, Libya

Abstract

The use of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms has been a subject of significant debate among educators and researchers. While monolingual approaches emphasize maximizing L2 exposure, bilingual approaches recognize the strategic role of L1 in facilitating comprehension and learning. This paper explores the role of the mother tongue in L2 classrooms through three key perspectives: historical evolution, teacher and student attitudes, and pedagogical strategies. It examines the transition from grammar-translation methods to monolingual approaches like the Direct Method and evaluates the resurgence of bilingual strategies. Teacher and student perspectives are analyzed, highlighting the practical benefits of L1 in classroom management, grammar explanation, and vocabulary instruction, alongside the challenges of overreliance. Additionally, the paper discusses pedagogical strategies that integrate L1 effectively while prioritizing L2 development. The findings underscore the importance of a balanced approach that considers the contextual needs of learners and educators, advocating for the judicious use of L1 to enhance L2 acquisition without compromising communicative competence.

Keywords: *Mother tongue, second language acquisition, bilingual education, Language teaching strategies, teacher and student attitudes.*

1. Introduction

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms has been a topic of enduring debate among linguists, educators, and researchers. At the heart of this discussion is whether the use of L1 supports or hinders the acquisition of L2. Traditional monolingual approaches advocate for the exclusive use of the target language, arguing that it maximizes exposure and promotes immersive learning. In contrast, proponents of bilingual approaches argue that strategic use of L1 can enhance comprehension, reduce learner anxiety, and support overall language development.

Historically, the role of L1 in L2 classrooms has evolved significantly, shifting from the grammar-translation method, where L1 played a central role, to modern communicative approaches that minimize its use. Despite this shift, many educators and researchers acknowledge the practical benefits of incorporating L1 judiciously, particularly for explaining complex grammar, clarifying vocabulary, and managing classrooms effectively. This paper aims to explore the role of the mother tongue in L2 education through three perspectives: historical evolution, teacher and student attitudes, and pedagogical strategies. By synthesizing insights from various studies and theoretical frameworks, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how L1 can be utilized effectively without compromising the primary goal of L2 acquisition.

The significance of this discussion lies in its implications for language teaching methodologies. Understanding when and how to use the mother tongue in L2 classrooms can help educators design more effective teaching strategies that cater to diverse learners' needs. This paper argues that rather than viewing L1 as a hindrance, it should be seen as a tool that, when used appropriately, can complement L2 learning and foster a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

The subsequent sections of this paper will delve into the historical evolution of L1 use in L2 classrooms, examine teacher and student attitudes toward its use, and discuss practical pedagogical strategies that balance L1 and L2 effectively.

2. Historical Perspectives on the Role of the Mother Tongue in L2 Classrooms

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms has undergone significant changes over time, influenced by evolving pedagogical theories and teaching methodologies. Historically, the use of L1 was prominent in the grammar-translation method, which dominated language teaching during the 18th and 19th centuries (Butzkamm, 2003). This approach relied heavily on translating texts between L1 and L2 to teach grammar and vocabulary, prioritizing reading and writing skills over oral communication (Brown, 2001). Proponents of this method argued that the integration of L1 allowed learners to better understand grammatical structures and meanings in L2 by leveraging their existing knowledge of L1.

By the late 19th century, the emphasis shifted toward monolingual approaches, such as the Direct Method, which advocated for exclusive use of the target language in classrooms. This approach emerged as a response to the perceived limitations of the grammar-translation method, particularly its neglect of oral communication and fluency. The Direct Method emphasized immersive learning, avoiding translation and focusing on spoken language, implicit grammar instruction, and the active use of L2 in context (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). This shift marked a significant reduction in the use of L1, driven by the belief that minimizing L1 exposure would accelerate L2 acquisition.

In the 20th century, the audiolingual method further reinforced monolingualism in language teaching. Rooted in behaviorist theories, this method prioritized drills and repetition in L2, viewing the use of L1 as a potential interference with habit formation (Cook, 2001). However, this strict exclusion of L1 was increasingly questioned as educators observed challenges in implementing monolingual policies, particularly in classrooms with beginner learners or limited resources.

More recently, communicative language teaching (CLT) has sought to balance the use of L1 and L2. While CLT emphasizes meaningful communication in L2, it acknowledges that strategic use of L1 can support language learning. Researchers such as Tang (2002) and Nation (2003) have highlighted the utility of L1 in explaining complex grammatical concepts, managing classrooms, and reducing learner anxiety. These findings have contributed to a growing recognition that L1, when used judiciously, can complement rather than hinder L2 acquisition.

Overall, the historical evolution of L1's role in L2 classrooms reflects broader shifts in educational philosophy and linguistic theory. While monolingual approaches have shaped much of modern language teaching, the resurgence of bilingual strategies underscores the value of flexibility and context-specific teaching practices.

3. Teacher Attitudes Toward the Use of the Mother Tongue in L2 Classrooms

The attitudes of teachers toward the use of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms vary widely, reflecting a balance between practical considerations and theoretical beliefs. While many educators acknowledge the benefits of monolingual approaches in promoting L2 immersion, others recognize the value of L1 as a supportive tool for effective teaching and learning. These attitudes are influenced by factors such as linguistic competence, classroom dynamics, and pedagogical training.

3.1 Support for Using the Mother Tongue

A significant number of teachers view L1 as an essential resource for facilitating L2 learning, particularly in contexts where students face challenges in comprehension. Teachers often use L1 to explain complex grammar rules, provide instructions, or clarify difficult vocabulary. Tang (2002) highlights that teachers feel L1 helps save time and ensures that students fully understand the material. For example, a quick explanation in L1 can resolve confusion more efficiently than prolonged attempts in L2.

Franklin (2001) found that many non-native English-speaking teachers find the exclusive use of L2 difficult, as their own proficiency levels and confidence in the target language may be limited. This is especially true in classrooms with beginners, where relying solely on L2 can lead to student frustration and disengagement.

3.2 Challenges of Monolingual Policies

Monolingual teaching policies that prohibit the use of L1 can create stress for both teachers and students. Teachers often struggle to adhere to such policies, particularly in large classes or when students have diverse proficiency levels. Ahmed (2009) observed that teachers in resource-limited settings, such as Libyan schools, often resort to L1 to maintain classroom management and ensure smooth transitions between activities. Similarly, Cook (2001) argues that strict monolingual policies ignore the realities of classroom teaching, where time constraints and mixed-ability groups make L1 a practical choice.

3.3 Balancing L1 and L2

Many educators advocate for a balanced approach, where L1 is used judiciously alongside L2. Meiring and Norman (2002) suggest that teachers should aim to maximize L2 exposure while strategically incorporating L1 when necessary. For instance, using L1 to provide initial explanations of abstract concepts or to clarify instructions can free up more classroom time for meaningful L2 practice.

Teachers also recognize that L1 can play a motivational role. For example, using L1 for humor or cultural references can create a more inclusive and comfortable classroom environment, particularly for beginners. Harmer (2003) emphasizes that a supportive classroom atmosphere is crucial for student persistence and engagement in language learning.

3.4 Key Influences on Teacher Attitudes

Several factors shape teacher attitudes toward L1 use, including:

1. **Training and Pedagogical Knowledge:** Teachers with training in communicative language teaching (CLT) often lean toward minimizing L1, while those with traditional training may feel more comfortable using L1 as a teaching aid (Ahmed, 2009).
2. **Classroom Context:** Large class sizes, limited resources, and mixed proficiency levels often compel teachers to rely on L1 for efficiency and effectiveness.
3. **Cultural and Linguistic Background:** Non-native English-speaking teachers often have firsthand experience with the challenges of L2 learning, which influences their preference for L1 inclusion.

Teachers' attitudes toward using the mother tongue in L2 classrooms reflect a pragmatic response to the challenges of language teaching. While many educators value the immersive benefits of monolingual policies, they also recognize the practical advantages of L1 in addressing comprehension issues, managing classrooms, and fostering student confidence.

A balanced approach that considers the specific needs of learners and the classroom context appears to be the most effective strategy.

4. Student Attitudes Toward the Use of the Mother Tongue in L2 Classrooms

Students' attitudes toward the use of their mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms are diverse, shaped by factors such as their proficiency level, learning environment, and individual preferences. While some students appreciate the exclusive use of the target language (L2) for immersion, many find the strategic use of L1 helpful in reducing confusion, enhancing comprehension, and building confidence.

4.1 Preference for L1 in Classroom Support

Numerous studies reveal that students, particularly beginners, prefer using L1 for explanations and clarifications. Tang (2002) found that approximately 72% of students agreed that L1 was essential for explaining complex grammatical concepts, while 69% used L1 to understand new vocabulary. Beginners often feel that L1 provides a foundation that makes L2 learning more accessible, reducing frustration and cognitive overload.

Schweer's study (as cited in Cook, 2001) also highlights that students feel more confident when L1 is used strategically in classrooms. Many learners report that the occasional use of L1 fosters a sense of familiarity and comfort, which is particularly important when grappling with challenging material.

4.2 Differences Based on Proficiency Levels

Student attitudes toward the use of L1 often vary depending on their proficiency in L2. Research suggests that beginners and lower-intermediate learners are more likely to favor the use of L1, as it helps them understand fundamental concepts and navigate the early stages of language learning (Butzkamm, 2003). In contrast, Auerbach (1993) stated that advanced learners tend to prefer monolingual approaches, believing that exclusive L2 use enhances fluency and communicative competence.

This variation in preferences indicates the need for context-sensitive teaching strategies. For beginners, judicious use of L1 can facilitate learning, while advanced learners may benefit from methods that minimize L1 to promote higher-order language skills.

4.3 The Role of L1 in Reducing Anxiety and Building Confidence

The use of L1 in L2 classrooms can also alleviate the anxiety associated with learning a new language. For many students, especially those in non-native English-speaking countries, L2 classrooms can feel intimidating due to unfamiliar vocabulary and structures. L1 use in initial explanations or during moments of confusion can reassure students, enabling them to engage more actively in learning.

Students often use L1 in peer interactions, especially during pair or group work. This use of L1 allows them to collaborate effectively, clarify ideas, and prepare responses in L2. Such practices build confidence, as students feel better equipped to participate in classroom activities.

4.4 Concerns About Overreliance on L1

Despite the advantages, some students express concerns about overreliance on L1, particularly in classrooms where teachers default to L1 excessively. Excessive L1 use may limit students' opportunities to practice L2 and hinder their exposure to authentic language input. As Macaro (2000) notes, students achieve strategic communicative competence only through active use of L2, emphasizing the importance of creating a balanced classroom environment.

4.5 Implications for Language Teaching

Student attitudes underscore the importance of using L1 as a supportive tool rather than a crutch. Teachers should consider learner preferences and proficiency levels when incorporating L1 into their teaching strategies. For beginners, L1 can serve as a bridge to L2 learning, while advanced learners may benefit from immersive approaches that prioritize L2. Students' attitudes toward the use of the mother tongue in L2 classrooms highlight its dual role as a facilitator of understanding and a potential barrier to immersion. While beginners appreciate the comfort and clarity that L1 provides, advanced learners often favor monolingual methods to improve fluency. A balanced, context-sensitive approach that tailors L1 use to learner needs can enhance the overall language learning experience.

5. Pedagogical Strategies Incorporating the Mother Tongue in L2 Classrooms

The judicious use of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms can serve as an effective pedagogical tool to enhance learning outcomes, provided it is implemented strategically. Several methods and approaches integrate L1 into teaching practices to balance comprehension and language immersion, ensuring that the primary focus remains on L2 acquisition.

5.1 The Bilingual Method

One of the most structured approaches to incorporating L1 is the bilingual method, developed by C. J. Dodson. In this method, the teacher uses L1 to explain meanings and concepts, while L2 is used for practice and application. Dodson's approach involves presenting new material in L2, followed by an explanation in L1, and then reinforcing the concept through repetition and exercises in L2 (Butzkamm, 2003). This method ensures that learners can connect the new language to their existing knowledge base without becoming overly dependent on translation.

5.2 Collaborative Language Learning (CLL)

Collaborative language learning encourages the use of L1 as a resource in peer-to-peer interactions. In this approach, students work together to understand and practice L2 concepts, often using L1 to clarify instructions, negotiate meaning, or build confidence in completing tasks. Cook (2001) suggests that collaborative activities can reduce cognitive overload, especially for beginners, and allow students to transition to L2 more effectively.

5.3 Scaffolding with L1

Scaffolding is a teaching strategy where the teacher provides temporary support to help learners achieve tasks they would not be able to perform independently. L1 can serve as a scaffold, particularly for complex tasks such as explaining abstract grammar rules, introducing new vocabulary, or discussing cultural nuances (Tang, 2002). Once students have grasped the concept, the teacher gradually reduces the use of L1, encouraging students to rely more on L2.

5.4 Trans-language

Trans-language is a modern pedagogical approach that embraces the dynamic use of multiple languages in the classroom. In this method, students and teachers intentionally switch between L1 and L2 to maximize comprehension and engagement (García & Wei, 2014). For example, a lesson may begin with a discussion in L1 to establish context and then transition to L2 for practice and application. Trans-language leverages students' full linguistic repertoire, promoting a deeper understanding of both languages.

5.5 L1 as a Tool for Classroom Management

In many contexts, particularly with beginner learners, L1 is an effective tool for managing classroom activities. Teachers often use L1 to give instructions, address behavioral issues, or explain complex tasks quickly and efficiently. This use of L1 minimizes confusion and maximizes instructional time, allowing the teacher to focus more on L2 practice (Ahmed, 2009).

5.6 L1 for Vocabulary Building

L1 can be used strategically to teach vocabulary by providing direct translations alongside L2 usage examples. Teachers may use bilingual glossaries or flashcards with both L1 and L2 terms. Nation (1990) notes that presenting new words in L1 can accelerate vocabulary acquisition and retention, particularly when combined with contextual L2 examples.

5.7 Integrating L1 in Multilingual Classrooms

In classrooms with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, L1 can still play a role by grouping students with the same L1 for specific tasks or by encouraging them to draw on their native language when working collaboratively (Butzkamm, 2003). This approach can foster inclusivity and make learning more accessible for all students.

5.8 Balancing L1 and L2

While these strategies illustrate the benefits of incorporating L1, it is crucial to strike a balance to avoid overreliance. Cook (2001) emphasizes that L1 should be used as a support mechanism, not as a replacement for L2. Teachers should aim to maximize L2 exposure while using L1 selectively to enhance understanding and engagement.

Pedagogical strategies incorporating the mother tongue recognize its potential to support language learning when used judiciously. Approaches such as the bilingual method, collaborative learning, and trans-language demonstrate that L1 can enhance comprehension, reduce anxiety, and facilitate a smoother transition to L2 proficiency. However, the key lies in maintaining a balance that prioritizes L2 immersion while leveraging L1 as a tool for scaffolding and support.

6. Discussion

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms continues to generate significant debate among educators and linguists. This discussion explores the key findings from historical perspectives, teacher and student attitudes, and pedagogical strategies, emphasizing the nuanced role of L1 in facilitating L2 acquisition.

6.1 Balancing Immersion and Support

The shift from grammar-translation methods to monolingual approaches, such as the Direct Method, underscores the historical emphasis on L2 immersion. However, studies and practical experiences reveal that exclusive reliance on L2 can pose challenges, particularly for beginners. As Tang (2002) and Cook (2001) argue, the strategic use of L1 can mitigate these challenges by providing clarity and reducing cognitive overload during the initial stages of language learning. This balance is essential to ensure that learners are not overwhelmed by the target language while still promoting L2 proficiency.

6.2 Teacher and Student Perspectives

Teachers' attitudes toward L1 use often reflect pragmatic considerations. Non-native English-speaking teachers, in particular, frequently rely on L1 to explain complex grammar, manage classrooms, and bridge cultural gaps (Ahmed, 2009). These practices highlight the practical benefits of L1, even in pedagogical frameworks that prioritize L2 immersion.

From the students' perspective, L1 serves as a confidence-building tool, particularly for beginners who may struggle with the initial demands of L2 learning. Schweer's findings (cited in Cook, 2001) reveal that most students appreciate the use of L1 for clarifications and instructions, which aligns with their preference for reduced confusion and increased comprehension (Butzkamm, 2003). However, advanced learners tend to favor monolingual approaches, as they perceive exclusive L2 use as essential for achieving fluency and communicative competence.

6.3 Pedagogical Strategies: Practical Implications

Pedagogical strategies such as the bilingual method, collaborative learning, and trans-language offer flexible ways to integrate L1 in L2 classrooms. These methods emphasize the judicious use of L1 to support understanding while maintaining the focus on L2 development (García & Wei, 2014). For instance, Dodson's bilingual method demonstrates how initial L1 explanations can transition into meaningful L2 practice (Butzkamm, 2003). Similarly, translanguaging leverages students' entire linguistic repertoire to enhance comprehension and engagement.

The challenge lies in avoiding overreliance on L1, which can hinder opportunities for meaningful L2 practice (Ahmed, 2009). Teachers must strike a balance, tailoring their use of L1 to the specific needs of their students and the context of the classroom. For instance, in large or diverse classrooms, L1 may be used selectively for classroom management or explaining abstract concepts, allowing more time for communicative L2 activities.

6.4 Context Matters: Factors Influencing L1 Use

The role of L1 in L2 classrooms is context-dependent, influenced by factors such as class size, student proficiency levels, and cultural dynamics. In multilingual settings, the use of L1 may require additional consideration to ensure inclusivity, particularly when students have different native languages. Additionally, institutional policies and teacher training play crucial roles in shaping attitudes and practices related to L1 use.

6.5 The Need for Further Research

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the benefits and limitations of L1 use, further research is needed to explore its role in specific educational contexts. For example, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of L1 use on L2 proficiency across different learner levels. Moreover, investigating how technological tools can facilitate bilingual strategies may offer innovative solutions for integrating L1 effectively.

The discussion highlights that the mother tongue is neither an inherent obstacle nor a guaranteed aid to second language learning. Instead, its effectiveness depends on how and when it is used. A balanced, context-sensitive approach that prioritizes L2 immersion while strategically incorporating L1 can optimize learning outcomes. Educators must adapt their practices to align with the needs of their students, recognizing that the judicious use of L1 can serve as a powerful tool for fostering comprehension, confidence, and overall language proficiency.

7. Conclusion

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms has been a subject of significant debate, evolving alongside shifts in teaching methodologies and pedagogical theories. This paper has explored the historical perspectives, teacher and student attitudes, and pedagogical strategies associated with L1 use, highlighting its potential to enhance L2 learning when used judiciously.

Historically, the transition from grammar-translation methods to monolingual approaches like the Direct Method marked a shift toward prioritizing immersion in L2. However, practical challenges and research findings have demonstrated the value of incorporating L1 strategically, particularly in supporting comprehension, reducing anxiety, and building confidence among learners. Teachers and students alike recognize the practical benefits of L1, with teachers using it to clarify complex concepts and manage classrooms, while students, especially beginners, value its role in facilitating understanding and reducing confusion.

Pedagogical strategies such as the bilingual method, trans-language, and collaborative learning demonstrate how L1 can be integrated effectively into L2 teaching without compromising immersion. These methods emphasize a balanced approach, using L1 as a scaffold to support L2 learning while gradually transitioning to greater L2 use as students gain proficiency.

Ultimately, the use of L1 in L2 classrooms should be viewed as a flexible and context-sensitive tool rather than a rigid practice. While maximizing L2 exposure remains a critical goal, L1 can serve as a complementary resource that enhances learning outcomes when used appropriately. Future research and professional development for educators should focus on identifying best practices for integrating L1 in diverse teaching contexts, ensuring that it supports rather than detracts from the primary goal of L2 proficiency. By adopting a balanced and student-centered approach, educators can leverage the strengths of both languages to create an inclusive and effective learning environment.

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