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THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Second language use in the foreign language classroom needs to be maximized wherever possible, by encouraging its use and by using it for classroom management. However, research shows that the first language has a small but important role to play in communicating meaning and content. This role is important across all four strands of a course.

In a well balanced foreign or second language course, there are roughly equal opportunities for learning through the four strands of:

1. meaning focused input – learning through listening and reading

2. meaning focused output – learning through speaking and writing

3. language focused learning – learning through deliberate attention to language features

4. fluency development – learning through working with known material across the four skills at a higher than usual level of performance.

Research has shown that the first language of learners can play a useful role in some of these strands and the aim of this article is to look at some of this research and to clearly identify those parts of a language course where there is value in using the L1. Before doing this, let us look briefly at ways of increasing the use of the L2. Where learners have little opportunity to meet and use the L2 outside the classroom, it is very important that L2 use is maximized in the classroom. One obvious way to do this is carry out classroom management in the L2, English. Classroom management involves things like telling the class what to do, controlling behaviour (be quiet), explaining activities (get into pairs). This requires a little bit of careful thought by the teacher so that the vocabulary and structures used in the language of classroom management are also generally useful. If the use of English in classroom management is done in a planned, consistent way, then classroom management can be a very effective opportunity for learning through meaning focused input. A very useful piece of classroom-based research would be to identify through observation

the functions and forms of the language of classroom management, and then devise a classified list of useful sentences that make use of generally high frequency words and grammatical structures. In this way the role of the L1 in classroom management can be minimized and the role of the L2 increased.

In classrooms where the learners all share the same L1 or national language, there is a tendency for tasks which should be done in the L2 such as conversation activities, discussion of intensive reading, preparation for writing etc to be done in the L1. There are many reasons for this L1 use. Firstly it is more natural to use the L1 with others who have the same L1. Secondly, it is easier and more communicatively effective to use the L1, and thirdly, using the L2 can be a source of embarrassment particularly for shy learners and those who feel they are not very proficient in the L2. Towards the end of this article we will look at a range of options for overcoming this reluctance to use the L2, because as a general policy it is important to have strong strands of L2 meaning focused use and fluency development in a course. There are, however, some times when use of the L1 can have very positive effects on learning and we will now look at these in relation to the four strands.

First language use and meaning focused input and output

Meaning focused tasks can carry a heavy cognitive load. Not only do learners have to focus on what to say or what is being said, they also have to focus on how to say it or how it is being said. The first language discussion of the task had some interesting features. Firstly, the learners were all very actively involved in coming to grips with the ideas. Secondly, the first language discussion included quite a lot of the second language vocabulary. Thus the discussion not only helped learners to get on top of the content, but it also helped them gain control of relevant L2 vocabulary in a very supportive L1 contextAs a result, the learners who did the preparatory L1 discussion in groups did much better on the L2 written task than other learners who did preparatory L2 discussion even though that discussion was in the same language as the subsequent written task. There is thus a useful role for the L1 in helping learners gain the knowledge needed to reach a higher level of L2 performance. Whenever a

teacher feels that a meaning based L2 task might be beyond the capabilities of the learners, a small amount of L1 discussion can help overcome some of the obstacles.

First language use and language focused learning

There are numerous ways of conveying the meaning of an unknown word. These include a definition in the second language, a demonstration, a picture or a diagram, a real object, L2 context clues, or an L1 translation. In terms of the accuracy of conveying meaning, none of these ways is intrinsically better than any of the others. It all depends on the particular word concerned. Although there are frequent criticisms raised of learning L1-L2 word pairs, these criticisms are not supported by research. The research shows the opposite, the direct learning of L2 vocabulary using word cards with their L1 translations is a very effective method of learning.

This finding also receives some support from studies of dictionary use. Learners' dictionaries can be classified into two major types – those that only use the L2 (monolingual dictionaries like the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the COBUILD Dictionary, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Cambridge Learners Dictionary), and those that make use of the L1 (bilingual or bilingualised dictionaries). A bilingualised dictionary is a monolingual dictionary with L1 translations included. Monolingual dictionaries usually contain a wealth of useful information and in an attempt to make them accessible for lower proficiency learners, the definitions are often within a controlled vocabulary. The definition vocabulary usually consists of around 2000 words. Thus to use a monolingual dictionary effectively learners need to have a effective receptive vocabulary of 2000 words. Most learners of English as a foreign language do not achieve this until they have been studying English for five to six years. To effectively use a monolingual dictionary, learners need to have a large enough vocabulary (at least 2000 words) and need to be able to interpret definitions, which are much more difficult than L1 synonyms.

Increasingly, languages borrow a lot of words from English. Daulton (1998) for example, estimates that about half of the most common 3000 words of English have some borrowed form in Japanese. Sometimes the borrowing has resulted in so many

formal and semantic changes that the relationship to English is hard to see (wan-piisu – a one piece dress), but most often the relationship is clear (waasuto – worst). Encouraging learners to notice this borrowing and to use the loan words to help the learning of English is a very effective vocabulary expansion strategy. First language use and fluency development.

Fluency development tasks need to involve language items that are already familiar to the learners, need to involve largely familiar content, and need to include some kind of encouragement to perform faster than usual. This encouragement can take the form of time pressure as in speed reading or the 4/3/2 activity. The L1 can have a small role to play in preparing the learners for such tasks to make sure that the material they are working with is truly familiar. This preparation can involve helping learners recall L1 stories and information that they then work with in the L2, or getting learners to use the L1 to discuss and become very familiar with L2 input, such as newspaper articles, TV news reports, short factual texts, that is then used as the basis for L2 fluency tasks.

In most of the roles of the L1 that we have looked at, there is the common theme that the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in the L2. It is foolish to arbitrarily exclude this proven and efficient means of communicating meaning. To do so would be directly parallel to saying that pictures or real objects should not be used in the L2 class (Nation 1978). All the arguments against L1 use similarly apply to the use of pictures, real objects, and demonstration. The L1 needs to be seen as a useful tool that like other tools should be used where needed but should not be over-used. Let us now conclude by looking at ways of avoiding over-use of the L1 and encouraging L2 use.

In classes where learners all share the same first language or national language, teachers need to use a range of options to encourage learners to use the L2 as much as possible. The following range of options is based on the idea that there are several reasons why learners use the L1 when they should be using the L2. These reasons include low proficiency in the L2, the naturalness of using the L2 to do certain jobs,

shyness in using the L2, or simply a lack of interest in learning the L2. Here are some of the ways of dealing with these obstacles to L2 use.

1. Choose manageable tasks that are within the learners' proficiency.

2. Prepare learners for tasks by preteaching the language items and skills needed.

3. Use staged and graded tasks that bring learners up to the level required.

4. Get learners to pretend to be English speakers.

5. Make the L2 an unavoidable part of the task. Retelling activities, strip stories, completion activities, and role plays all require the use of the L2.

6. Repeat tasks to make them easier.

7. Inform learners of the learning goals of each task so that they can see how using the L2 will help them achieve a clear short term learning goal.

8. Discuss with the learners the value of using the L2 in class.

9. Get learners to discuss the reasons why they avoid using the L2 and get them to suggest solutions to encourage L2 use.

10. Set up a monitoring system to remind learners to use the L2. In group work speaking tasks this can involve giving one learner in each group the role of reminding others to use the L2.

11. Use non-threatening tasks. Learners can choose their own groups, the teacher can stay out of the groups, allow learners to prepare well for the tasks, don't use tasks that put learners in embarrassing situations, and choose interesting, nonthreatening topics.

If encouraging L2 use is a problem, several of these different solutions may need to be used. These solutions cover a range of affective, cognitive, and resource approaches and thus can be seen as complementary rather than as alternatives. In some countries, English and the L1 are in competition with each other and the use of English increases at the expense of the L1. Teachers need to show respect for the learners' L1 and need to avoid doing things that make the L1 seem inferior to English. At the same time, it is the English teacher's job to help learners develop their proficiency in English. Thus, a balanced approach is needed which sees a role for the L1 but also recognises the importance of maximising L2 use in the classroom.

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