

Using L1 in L2 Classroom

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Abstract

Nowadays, People are paying more attention to second-language teaching, and more in-depth research has been done on teaching methods. There has also been controversy over whether students' first language can be used in second-language classrooms. Therefore, this paper will analyze this issue in the context of education, the two-sided debate on this issue in previous research, my personal experience, and the implications.

Keywords: mother tongue, second language, English language teaching

1. Background

According to the principles set by TESOL, whether EFL or ESL students should use their L1 in the classroom has been debated for numerous years (Morahan, 2010). Since the end of the 19th century, most influential theoretical works on language teaching have no dispute about teaching learners a new language (L2) without referring to their mother tongue (L1) (Cook, 2001). Over time, many researchers' general opinions about using students' mother tongue in their second language classroom have been changed. They discovered the functions and positive results of proper using L1 in the classroom and will not hinder L2 learning, so that L1 should be allowed in L2 classroom. This paper will discuss three sections, including the arguments which support and oppose the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, my personal perspective, and the implication for teachers and students.

2. Arguments Against It

The comprehensive and input hypothesis of Krashen states that second language acquisition should maximize input in the classroom, so L1 should not be allowed in L2 classrooms (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Krashen (1982) believes that learning occurs through the study of language rules and patterns. These rules and patterns enable learners to apply knowledge consciously, while language acquisition occurs through comprehensible input, which is the language that learners understand. His input hypothesis assumes that understanding the message or receiving intelligible input is the only feasible way to obtain L2 (Krashen, 1982). In other words, learners can gain more knowledge by understanding the problems exposed in L2. Therefore, his hypothesis emphasizes the idea of ignoring the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, and instead he advocates that L2 is exposed to the greatest extent only at a comprehensible level. Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1981) agrees with Krashen's view that the success of SLA depends on the exposure to the required L2, and it is not recommended to use L1 in the context of L2 because it reduces the exposure of L2 in question. He stated that learners acquire language through the negotiation of the meaning that occurs in the interaction. He believes that the teacher-student interaction, such as conversation, is the key to obtaining L2. In 1996, Long focused on cognitive factors, such as attention correction and feedback in communication (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Due to the "interference" of L1, mistakes made when learning L2 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The negative transfer of L1 may appear in two comparable structurally different languages, causing difficulties and errors for second language learners. Cook (2001) indicates that this situation is considered that L1 interferes with SLA, which to be an error caused by the lack of learning L2, mainly the result of LI interference. If language teaching

does not avoid these interferences, some “misunderstandings” of L2 will become deeply ingrained. Therefore, many researchers do not agree to use L1 in L2 classrooms (VanPatten & Williams, 2020).

Many studies have discovered negative transfer of L1 at various aspects of language. Taking Chinese as an example, Rintell (1984) found that Chinese English learners experience negative transfer in phonetic aspects. English and Chinese are two different types of languages in phonetics. Chinese is a tone language, and the Pinyin of each Chinese character has its own individual tone, which is essential to identify the meaning. English is an intonation language that has different syllables and intonation. However, some Chinese students will use their Chinese Pinyin to determine the phonetic transcription or pronunciation of words, but there are some English morphemes that do not exist in Chinese, leading Chinese learners to pronounce many words that are incorrect or not standard. The negative transfer of L1 is also reflected in the syntactic aspects. In the research of Li (2002), it is found that the syntactic differences between L1 and L2, such as word order, sentence structure, and expression also cause negative transfer. For example, the positions of some sentence components in the sentence structure of English and Chinese are different, and students may make mistakes when code-switching between L1 and L2. If the teacher cannot pay attention to the negative transfer of L1 to students, and these errors are not discovered in time, it may be difficult for students to correct the wrong pronunciation or cognition in the future and hinder the learning of new knowledge.

With too much L1 used by the teacher, students may overly rely on the teacher’s translation. Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney do not recommend the use of L1 in L2 classes, because excessive use of L1 may cause them to turn students’ attention to L1, resulting in their cognitive dependence on L1. Research by Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) found that some students and teachers believe that using L1 will cause overuse concerns, including minimizing students’ exposure to the target language and increasing their dependence on L1. Therefore, they came to the conclusion that the use of L1 should be reduced or prohibited in the classroom, and students’ contact time with L2 should be increased. This can focus students’ attention on L2 and improve their L2 learning efficiency. They will not rely too much on their L1 when learning L2.

3. Arguments Support It

Although there are many theories don’t think that using L1 in L2 classrooms is a good idea, many researchers still believe that language is a great cognitive tool to help people communicate to convey information. In other words, in terms of language, L1 is the most powerful intermediary thought that students have, which can help them explore the knowledge of L2. Students can use L1 to communicate with each other in the classroom, not only to convey information, but also to express their thoughts, emotions and identities (Cook, 2001). Vygotski’s cognitive and sociocultural theory (1980) states that students can learn language by using L1 to establish dialectical relationships with peers or teachers. When students learn a new language, this theory also has a significant impact on cognitive development. Vygotsky (1980) considers that there are two levels that learners can learn everything. First, through the interaction in the classroom, learners then integrate the knowledge they have learned into their personal psychological structure. Another aspect is about the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The definition of ZPD is an area where people can conduct cognitive exploration and preparation with the help of others (Vygotsky, 1980). For example, in the classroom, teachers can use “scaffolding” to enhance their comprehension and application of knowledge or skill development (Vygotsky, 1980). In other words, students’ L1 can be used as a scaffold in ZPD to help them explore and understand the meaning of L2, which helps students learn L2 to a certain extent.

The multicompetence theory proposed by Cook (2003) indicates that teachers should not use the L1 learning method for L2 learners. Students’ L1 is actually a resource for them to learn L2, not the traditionally defined negative transfer. A study by Lightbown and Spada (1999) found that many educationists believe that students will use their L1 knowledge to decrypt the target Language. Cook (2003) believes that language itself has a unique form of ability and learners have the right to choose whether to use their L1. The multicompetence perspective allows language to be regarded as a part of a larger system, rather than an independent entity in the mind of learners. And because both knowledges of L1 and L2 are in learners’ mind, they influence each other and are not completely isolated systems. Therefore, since bilingual and multilingual can switch codes between languages, they can use different languages in many ways. In addition, the interaction between their capabilities in different languages can make up the learners’ linguistic repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008).

Use L1 to make learners express their ideas more clearly and effectively (Cook, 2001). According to Moore (2013), the use of L1 may increase the interaction of learners in the L2 classroom, which is related to the social cognitive negotiation of the teaching role, inter-subjectivity, and interpersonal construction of internal and private speech. These structures play a vital role in the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, because Moore’s research (2013) shows that L1 always exists in the process of learning L2. Learners will unconsciously use L1 in private and internal language. For example, in a cooperative task, if the team members have the same L1, then they will involuntarily use L1 to communicate. This will increase the motivation of students and make them more willing

to interact with other students. It also saves class time to a certain extent and further improves the learning efficiency of L2 classrooms.

The fifth hypothesis of Krashen's "monitoring model"—the affective filter hypothesis assumes that using student L1 can reduce learners' language anxiety and promote learning motivation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This basic principle shows that if the emotions of foreign language students are affected by the difficulty of the L2, their desire will decrease. Because confusion often makes students feel frustrated, indignant and resist learning the target language, so students' SLA becomes very difficult. Meyer (2008) points out that students must understand the teaching goals and objectives of target language teaching, which can prevent this phenomenon from happening to a certain extent. The use of students' L1 will improve their understanding of the language classroom environment and reduce emotional filters. Similarly, Brown's research (2000) points out that negative evaluation from society and language anxiety can affect learners' affective filtering in their L2 classroom. But using the student's L1 can alleviate all three aspects of language anxiety. For example, by supporting students to use their L1 in the classroom to fully express their opinions, promote more direct communication with each other, reduce the worry of communication barriers, and thus reduce learners' fear of negative social evaluations, and then generate positive social impression (Brown, 2000). In addition, as the understanding of classroom interaction increases, using L1 in basic instructions of class can also reduce language anxiety and enhancing motivation.

4. Personal Perspective

I used to be an English teaching assistant in China for several months and found that establishing student motivation is one of the key factors for successful teaching. Because students who are not interested in classroom texts will find it difficult to participate in the classroom, their learning efficiency will become very low (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). According to my English teaching assistant experience, the students' English level was at an intermediate level. I used Chinese to provide shortcuts, such as providing explanations and instructions, managing classroom discipline, comprehension checks, explaining classroom activities and tasks, managing classroom discipline, and maintaining interactive communication with students. I think the proper use of Chinese in English classes will encourage students to actively participate in activities, so that students will have confidence in themselves. Therefore, using L1 in the classroom and allowing students to work in their own Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) can promote students' enthusiasm for learning English. In addition, confirming code-switching as normal L2 activity can inspire more natural L2 learning. When taught, I found that students were likely to mediate between Chinese and English, so keeping the two languages separately in teaching can make students more comfortable with the way that Chinese and English switch in conversations. As a teacher, I will be obligated to help students. If continuing to learn English does not enable students to form a comprehensive understanding, then I will allow students to use L1 appropriately, or use L1 when answering questions or providing feedback to students, which will promote their learning English.

As a learner, I support the use of L1 in the L2 class because Chinese is very helpful to me in the process of learning English. I often use L1 in group or pair works in the L2 classroom. This allows me to talk about my point of view easier, and I think that I can communicate with others in Chinese, which brings a sense of intimacy. I have more desire to communicate. In addition, there are many tools to help me learn English, such as bilingual dictionaries. Since I was a beginner, I have been told by the teacher that when I encountered unknown words, I need to use a dictionary to find their meaning and keep them in mind. I learned a lot of words in this way. Also, in my bachelor courses in Canada, although the teachers did not allow students to use mobile phones in class, they agreed to ask non-native English speakers like us to have mobile phones to look up words. What's more, the Chinese subtitles or bilingual subtitles really helped me a lot when I watched the video in class. These captions not only made me less pressure to understand the content of this video, but also learned a lot of grammar and words. However, my EAP teacher in China did not want us to use too much Chinese in class, because then she had no way to know whether we were actually discussing the content of the class or participating in the activity. Moreover, due to limited classroom time, excessive use of Chinese will reduce our time for real learning and using English, such as conversations. So, I think that as a learner while ensuring the quality of L2 input, they can also use their L1 appropriately to promote learning efficiency.

5. Implications

There are many studies that have provided some suggestions for TESOL teachers and students on how to use their first language wisely to improve L2 teaching and acquisition (Cook, 2001).

5.1 Implications for English Teachers

It is important for the teacher to consider the teaching context. There are many factors that affect the teacher's attitude towards L1 use and the amount of L1 use, such as the objectives of the course, the proficiency of the students and their attitude towards L1 use, and the teaching environment. Levin (2014) states that the classroom

is a multilingual social space, so both teachers and learners can use the TL (target language) and learners' L1 effectively with creativity and teaching. The course design is also important. It is the prerequisite for a good reading class because student participation is the key to learning motivation (Kim et al., 2016). A teacher should carefully design the curriculum and introduces the context of the text. Students who are not interested in classroom texts will find it difficult to participate in the classroom and their learning efficiency will become very low (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In order to keep students' motivation to learn L2, when teachers design courses, they should start with the content of reading materials and use appropriate methods, for example, using some textbooks containing a certain amount of L1.

While evaluating the students, teachers also need to reflect on the use of L1 when teaching. Teachers need to evaluate their exercises and which strategies are effective for students to ensure that L1 is used correctly in L2 classes. For example, using classroom recordings, peer observations and conversations, student feedback, and evaluation of student performance and learning outcomes. For example, if a strategy seems to work, but the student does not show growth and progress through this method, then the teacher has the responsibility to work hard to find the most suitable teaching method for the student.

5.2 Implications for Students in the L2 Classroom

Students need to have a comprehensive understanding of their L2 proficiency level. They should understand their proficiency in order to understand how to use their L1 to improve their English learning. Students can understand their English level in various ways, such as Vocabulary level test, IELTS, TOEFL and so on. However, students must have enough knowledge of themselves and understand their level of L2 proficiency in order to find strategies and tools suitable for their L2 acquisition.

Then, there are some useful tools and strategies that students can select to assist SLA, such as bilingual dictionaries or bilingual subtitles in videos. L1 can also be used in some class activities, such as discussions and collaborative writing. If the students in the group use the same L1, they will tend to use their L1 when discussing, which can help them explore and reflect on topics more easily and use L2 to express ideas more confidently. There are also many techniques to help learners learn L2. For example, computer assisted language learning (CALL) can improve students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of L2. In other words, students can choose appropriate L1-related tools or strategies to help them learn L2 after understanding their L2 proficiency.

Each student must have a correct attitude towards learning L2. When it comes to the role of L1 in L2 classrooms, regardless of their English level, students need to maintain a positive and serious learning attitude. L1 is not a "necessity" in the L2 classroom, but for those students with a relatively low level of L2, proper use of L1 can provide them with a good learning environment and improve their learning interest and motivation. It is an effective scaffolding to use learners' L1 according to their English proficiency. Cook (2003) states that L1 scaffolding can not only promote L2 learning, but also reduce the anxiety and fear of students, especially the beginners. Also, it can make students always have a positive attitude towards L2 acquisition.

6. Conclusion

All in all, although many researchers believe that L1 should not be allowed in L2 classrooms, there are still many studies indicate that when TESOL uses L1 and L2 together, L1 will promote students' comprehension of L2. First of all, L2 learners will inevitably use L1 in the learning process, and teachers will also use L1 in the classroom to help students learn. Secondly, teachers should use L1 as a transition tool for learners in the classroom, because L1 can well help L2 learners with emotional factors in learning, such as reducing their language anxiety when facing second language challenges. But at the same time, in order to prevent the negative transfer of L1 and excessive dependence on L1, teachers and students should know how to use L1 appropriately. They can use different strategies to facilitate L2 input in the classroom, such as code-switching. In addition, there are many studies that provide some suggestions for English teachers and students to help them use L1 wisely to improve L2 teaching and acquisition. Although there are convincing research theories that L1 can promote L2 learning and L1 can be used in L2 classrooms, it is important to remember that the decision about whether to use L1, when to use L1 and how much L1 to be used depends on the teaching environment, teaching object, teaching content. Therefore, on the one hand, teachers should consider their teaching environment when try to use student's L1, including course objectives, students' proficiency, and students' willingness and attitude to use L1. Teachers can check whether they use L1 effectively and actively in the L2 classroom by communicating and interacting with students and assessing their activity and learning progress in the classroom. On the other hand, students are encouraged to be the core of English learning and use L1 in L2 classes as needed. After realizing their proficiency, they can find out the L1 tools and strategies that suit them. In addition, only through the joint efforts of teachers and students themselves can a positive environment for the rational use of L1 be achieved. However, L1 should be allowed and wisely used in the L2 classroom will promote the development of TESOL.

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