

USING MOTHER TONGUE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Shodikulova Dilafruz Xamrokulovna

*Samarkand State Institute of Foreign
Languages, 2nd year master student*

Bahriddinova Madina Shavkatovna

*Samarkand State Institute of Foreign
Languages, teacher*

Abstract: *Nowadays the problem of using the mother-tongue (L1) in the English language (L2) classroom is very complicated. This article offers some recommendations for using the L1 and its culture as a learning resource, as well as the findings of a study on students' opinions toward the usage of L1 in the classroom.*

Key words: *monolingual classes, monolingualism, elementary, intermediate, advanced learners, research, skepticism*

Reintroducing the mother tongue in monolingual classes (1993). Atkinson recommends "careful, limited use of L1" to help students get the most out of activities that will otherwise be carried out in the target language. For example, in the procedural stages of a class, the mother tongue may be useful:

- establishing pair and group work
- resolving an activity that is clearly not working
- assessing comprehension

In addition to these basic guiding functions of L1, Atkinson also suggests using L1 as a teaching method for translation. According to researches with teachers, a common rationale for using L1 procedurally is that lessons do not need to be slowed down, or simply can not be done otherwise.

What about learners? But would the learner consent to such use?

The questionnaire was addressed to 300 Greek students at three levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced. Students were mostly teens or young adults. They were asked general questions to get their opinion on whether the teacher knew the student's native language and should use it in general.

65% of elementary-level students and about 50% of intermediate- and advanced-level students believe that teachers should be able to speak the student's native language. Should teachers use their mother tongue in class? Here the numbers of beginner and intermediate learners are quite large (66% and 58% respectively), but only a small minority (29%) of intermediate learners use their native language in the classroom. We consider it acceptable to use L1.

The biggest difference occurs when students are asked to approve specific uses of L1 in the classroom. Overall, higher level students are less likely to agree to use their native language in the classroom. For example, when she used L1 to explain grammar, beginners strongly supported it (31%), while intermediate and advanced students almost unanimously disagreed (7% vs. 0% for her).

1. Explanation of the difference in usage between L1 and L2 rules 1 in 3 beginners and 1 in 5 intermediate/intermediate learners feel comfortable using L1 for 'contrastive discourse'.

2. Ask for vocabulary "How do you say (the L1 word) in English? Advanced learners find it most helpful to ask for the English equivalent in their native language (38%).

In all other instances where L1 is used in the classroom, most middle and high school students feel the need to hear and use English. This sentiment includes "procedural" or administrative use of the target language: give instructions, check listening and reading comprehension. The bottom line is that procedural language in the classroom is too good an opportunity to expose students to natural English and not waste their mother tongue. This contrasts very strongly with the view of Atkinson given above.

On the other hand, the general skepticism of her L1 in her ELT classroom exhibited by these particular students does not mean that there is no L1 place at all. Proceed to the next section to explore various techniques for using L1 to facilitate both learning and mastery.

In response to researches that L1 language and culture is a valuable resource, I would like to propose some activities that use L1 in some way. I am assuming a monolingual education.

1. Awareness-raising activities

Questionnaires like the one I used can help start discussions about using L1 and address the skepticism of some students.

2. Contrast between L1 and L2

Areas useful for this study are collocations, proverbs, and idioms. Comparing verb and noun collocations in the two languages helps students understand how L1 interference often causes problems. Comparing proverbs gives insight into cultural and linguistic differences.

3. Research at L1, presentation at L2

For example, after working on a textbook on a famous author, you may ask a student to look up celebrities from his/her country (using L1 and L2) and give a presentation in his/her L2 later class. Another alternative is a local history project that interviews grandparents at L1 and reports at L2.

In these examples, a foreign language is a medium through which students explore their own culture while using their mother tongue as a bridge to English.

This paper summarizes that students are skeptical of using his/her L1 in the classroom. Especially at higher levels. However, bilingual/bicultural teachers can enrich the learning process by using their native language as a resource, and use of L1 culture facilitates students' progression into other languages and cultures.

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