

## The Benefits of Using L1 in Foreign Language Learning Process

Tamuna Khetaguri<sup>1</sup> & Mzia Zangaladze<sup>2</sup> & Mustafa Albay<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Education, Gori State Teaching University, Gori, Georgia

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Education, Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq.

Correspondence: Mustafa Albay, Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq. Email: mustafa.albay@ishik.edu.iq

Received: January 9, 2016

Accepted: February 25, 2016

Online Published: March 1, 2016

**Abstract:** It is believed that when learners are exposed to the target language excessively, they will have more practice to develop their language proficiency, for that reason the use of L1 in the language classroom is insistently avoided. However, if learners fail to understand in the target language, they cannot learn effectively; therefore, the use of first language (L1) in language classes should not be prohibited. Learning occurs in the target language (TL) in the language classroom based on the fact that learners understand activities. Thus, L1 has a facilitating factor in the language learning process. This study aims to put forth the benefits of using L1 in second language (L2) learning.

**Keywords:** First language, Second language, Comprehension, Language learning

### 1. Introduction

The use of L1 in foreign language teaching has been a controversial issue. Learners are believed to achieve foreign language learning effectively when they are involved in L2 in the language learning process, but using mother-tongue in the target language learning has obvious advantages.

The use of L1 has been less favored in L2 learning; therefore, mostly precluded. The widespread belief is that the constant use of the target language in the language learning process will lead to achievement. Turnball and Arnett (2002) advocate this idea and they conclude that “since teachers are often the primary source of linguistic input in the TL, it is therefore reasonable to argue that maximizing the TL in the classroom is a favorable practice” (p.205). Similarly, Krashen (1985) is of the opinion that learners learn L2 better in a learning environment where it is spoken. However, the use of L1 is a useful resource in L2 learning, and it facilitates second language learning.

### 2. The Benefits of Using L1

The use of first language can contribute to learners’ language proficiency; therefore, L1 should not be neglected in the language learning process. Though the use of L2 is given priority, the use of L1 should be allowed where necessary (Weschler, 1997) in foreign language learning. Atkinson (1987) argues that “although the mother tongue is not a suitable basis for a methodology, it has, at all levels, a variety of roles to play which are at present consistently undervalued” ( p.247). L1 is a useful tool to help learners with their language proficiency development. A total ban on the use of L1 will hinder

learners' comprehension of the target language. As Willis (1996) puts forward "don't ban mother-tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language" (p.130).

Ernesto Macaro (1997) lists the benefits of using L1 as:

- a. First language is helpful for giving instruction to perform activities in the classroom
- b. Translation of some points and checking comprehension
- c. Giving feedback to students
- d. To maintain discipline in the classroom, first language is a useful tool

It is apparent that learners cannot carry out the learning task if they fail to understand it. By extension, learning does not occur without a complete comprehension. Thus, the use of L1 is a useful pedagogy to enable learners become aware of what they are doing.

Cook (2001, p. 418) offers some uses of L1 as:

- a. To facilitate the comprehension process when the use of L2 cannot be grasped by the learners
- b. To build a relationship between L1 and L2 in the minds of the students
- c. To continue learning tasks without any misunderstandings.
- d. To develop L2 activities for later real-life use

If the goals of an activity are not clearly understood, learners will not get involved effectively. And, they will not have the opportunity to improve their target language level, furthermore, learners will lose their motivation and desire in language learning. When learners do not understand what to do, and how to do, comprehension gap will occur. The use of L1 will fill in this gap, and learners will get more motivated to succeed more. Comprehension holds an important place in language learning, and "in order to prevent the misunderstanding of the meaning of the new word, teachers should provide clear, simple, and brief explanations of meaning, especially in the learners' first language" ( Bouangeune, 2009, p.189). If comprehension does not occur, all activities used in the classroom are useless. L1 is a useful tool to make the meaning clear. Moreover, the use of L1 to give feedback to learners will confirm the comprehension. When teachers are convinced that learners have understood what is presented to them, they go on teaching. If teachers sense that comprehension does not occur, they will have to change their teaching strategies.

In order to see how grammar works in the target language, and understand errors, learners have a tendency to make a comparison between L1 and L2. Stern (1992) argues that "the L1-L2 connection is an undisputable fact of life, whether we like it or not the new knowledge is learnt on the basis of the previously acquired language" (p. 282). Learners are prone to developing their L2 knowledge on the basis of L1 knowledge. This comparison allows them to master the rules in L2 effectively. Simply put, learners through transferring their L1 knowledge can easily pick up L2 knowledge.

The appropriate use of L1 has several benefits in language learning, but the excessive use of L1 should be avoided. As Macaro mentions "only through the learner using L2 can s/he achieve strategic communicative competence" (Macaro, 2001, p. 183). Too much exposure to L1 will restrict learners' communicative competence. Language skills will not sufficiently improve when L1 is overused.

Learners will not make enough effort to produce L2, and there will be a feeling that language items cannot be recognized until they are explained in L1.

### 3. Conclusion

Foreign language learning is not an easy process. Learners may have difficulty in understanding the target language at times. This difficulty can be removed from the language classroom by the use of L1. In particular, while giving instructions, providing lexical and structural knowledge, the implementation of L1 facilitates the learning process. It not only allows learners what and how to do, but also leads them to achievement. However, the excessive use of it is detrimental in language learning since it impedes communication skills of learners. In a nutshell, if used appropriately, L1 has obvious advantages, and can positively contribute to language learning.

### References

- Atkinson, D. (1987). The mother tongue in the classroom: A neglected resource? *ELT Journal*, 44(4), 241-247.
- Bouangeune, S. (2009). Using L1 in teaching vocabulary to low English proficiency level students: A case study at the University of Laos. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 2 (3), 186-193.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (2001). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Cook, V. (2001). Using the first language in the classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57(3), 402-423.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow: Pearson Education limited, Longman
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- Macaro, E. (1997). Target language, collaborative learning and autonomy. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
- Macaro, E. (2001). Analyzing student teacher's code switching in the foreign language classrooms: Theories and decision making. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85, 531-548.
- Stern, H.H. (1992). *Issues and options in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Turnbull, M., & Arnett, A. (2002). Teachers' uses of the target and first languages in second and foreign language classrooms. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 22, 204-218.
- Weschler, R. (1997). Uses of Japanese (L1) in English Classroom: Introducing the Functional-Translation Method, *The Internet TESL Journal*, [On-line]3(2). Retrieved on 15 November, 2015 from <http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/>
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.