



Better Ways of Using Learners' First Language in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract. The use of first language in English-as-a-foreign-language (hereinafter referred to as *EFL*) classrooms is still a controversial topic. Some studies have opposed the use of the students' native language (hereinafter referred to as *L1*) and have called for its abandonment in EFL classes. On the other hand, a wide variety of studies have underscored the facilitative role of *L1* in EFL classes and considered it as a helpful tool for boosting English learning. This article aims to find out the perceptions of teachers and students about the use of their first language in their EFL classroom in the teaching and learning processes.

Keywords. Perceptions of teachers and students, *L1*, EFL classrooms, immersion.

Introduction. Reasons to use *L1* by EFL teachers.

Before tackling the issue of whether *L1* should be used in the context of teaching foreign languages or not, the situations when teachers appear to have no choice, but to speak learners' native language, need to be discussed.

One of the most obvious and frequent resorts to learners' first language is the **explanation of complex grammar rules or vocabulary**. Obviously, this does not need to deal with the cases when gestures or miming are adequate to convey the meaning; however, when it comes to abstract notions and higher-level structures, it is sometimes hardly possible to avoid the use of native language to make the meaning clear.

Quite often, a teacher needs **ultimate clarity in understanding the instructions and directions** for the tasks and activities and uses *L1* to ensure this clarity. This also helps save a good deal of time preventing the teacher from plenty of rephrasing and simplification in English.



A teacher might also need to **address the differences between students' own and target culture**. Very often, the clarification of cultural references cannot proceed in target language because, being alien to the learners' own culture, those might be misunderstood. Take a case of the British tradition of understatement. When it comes to an English teacher explaining why a certain native speaker of English from Britain chooses to say "coldish" instead of "freezing" to describe a harsh winter, reference to the learners' native language often becomes the last resort.

Apart from the aforementioned, teachers often find it difficult to **deal with those students who have issues comprehending** the course content and complex concepts of target grammar. This problem generates another need to provide explanation and clarification in the first language of the learners as simplicity and clarity of the message are prevalent over learners' communicative performance in the target language. In such situations, production is often sacrificed to comprehension due to the priority of the latter one. Articulatory **aspects of pronunciation** are very often an issue to struggle against for the learners of a foreign language. This especially holds true for the native speakers of Uzbek due to several drastic phonetic differences. In such situations, native language becomes essential to explain articulatory subtleties to the learners.

Foreign language learning is also connected with a number of psychological processes and stages. An important shift that greatly affects the autonomy of language use by the learners is that of psychological realization that the learner can actually speak the foreign language. Such shift occurs at different time for different learners; however, a number of factors can advance it. One of such factors is **the emotional support and encouragement, which learners get from their teachers in their native language** and which decreases the sense of frustration and overwhelming and creates the sense of a comfort zone.

Controversy around the use of first language.

Given the possible situations above when L1 use in EFL classrooms might be seen as exclusively favourable, it is important to note that the use of first language should be limited and strategic, as the goal of an EFL classroom is to promote English language proficiency and communication skills.

Language learning theories that favour the use of learners' first language

The Comprehension Hypothesis a.k.a. *The Input Hypothesis*. This theory suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners understand message that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. Thus, for effective foreign



language acquisition to occur, the choice of language structures to include must be made in accordance with $i+1$ formula, according to which i is the scope of language structures and elements which the learner has already mastered and $+1$ is the next stage of language acquisition, also known as the next increment of new knowledge. The use of first language can help learners comprehend this next increment and make connections between the new language and their existing knowledge. Another proposition of the theory is that language acquisition occurs through exposure to comprehensible input. The use of first language can help learners understand input that is otherwise incomprehensible in English, thus facilitating acquisition.

The Interlanguage Hypothesis. It is based on interlanguage theory, which posits that a dormant psychological framework in the human brain is activated with study of a second language. The theory is credited to Larry Selinker, who coined the terms interlanguage and fossilization. This theory suggests that learners develop on intermediate system of language knowledge, known as interlanguage, as they attempt to learn a new language. The use of first language can help learners make connections between their interlanguage and the target language leading to more accurate and natural communication. Thus, the adherents of this theory claim the essential presence of the instruction in the first language due to the integrity of L1-interlanguage-FL triad.

The Cognitive Load Theory. Cognitive Load Theory emphasizes learners as thinking beings. It directs the teacher to design training or learning materials in such a way as to reduce the demands on learners' working memory, so that they learn more effectively. One can apply the concept of cognitive load to learning and training in several ways. From one of perspectives, this theory proposes that learning is most effective when cognitive loading is minimized. The use of first language can reduce cognitive load by allowing learners to process information more quickly and easily, and leading to more efficient learning.

While these theories support the use of first language in certain situations, they do not advocate for exclusive use of the first language or discourage the use of English in the classroom. The emphasis is generally put on a balanced use of first and foreign languages with only the secondary role of L1.

Possible disadvantages of immersion EFL programs

Immersion programs are FL learning programs that do not presuppose any use of learners' L1 during the lesson and outside as the learners are expected to be living in the country where target language is spoken as the primary one.



Teachers of immersion programs are usually native speakers of target language, who are not expected to be the speakers of the learners' native language. These factors create a number of disadvantages associated with different aspects of teaching-learning process and learning outcomes.

1. *Limited vocabulary.* Immersion programs may not provide enough opportunities for learners to learn and use vocabulary outside of the classroom, which can limit their ability to communicate effectively. Besides that, the meaning of some vocabulary items remains misunderstood by the learners causing acquisition failures.

2. *Frustration and anxiety.* Learners may become frustrated or anxious if they are unable to understand or communicate in the target language, which can negatively affect their motivation and confidence. Though benefitting linguistically, the learners may become disadvantaged affectively, which might seriously hinder the learning process.

3. *Lack of support.* Immersion programs may not provide enough support for learners who struggle with the target language community leading to misunderstanding and difficulties in communication. The phenomenon of language aptitude creates a wide variety of learning paces among the learners even in the context of one immersive classroom. Those of them who possess lower levels of aptitude need a speaker of their native language to provide them with the required support. Immersion programs often fail to make such a speaker available and make such learners disadvantaged.

4. *Cultural barriers.* Immersion programs may not adequately address cultural differences between learners and the target language community, leading to misunderstandings and difficulties in communication. Communicating in a foreign language in the context of living and learning it in a foreign country not only poses the difficulties connected with poor competence, but also those of a strange vision and interpretation of life and the surrounding world by native speakers of the language. This leads to the state of culture shock among the newcomers, affecting them psychologically and causing frustration. Such condition is partly caused by the lack of communication in native language, which a newcomer might find little opportunity to compensate for.

5. *Limited exposure.* Immersion programs may not provide enough exposure to a variety of accents and dialects, which can limit learners' ability to understand and communicate with different speakers of the target language. Native-speaker FL teachers generally speak a standard variety of the language



and encourage their students to do so. At the same time, the language used in real-life communication may have a number of differences, making it hardly possible for the immersion learners to understand.

A balanced use of first language in EFL classroom. A balanced use of the first language in an EFL classroom is needed to support language learning and ensure effective communication. It is important for teachers to use the first language strategically, such as when providing explanations, clarifications, or feedback, to help learners understand new concepts and overcome language barriers. Additionally, learners may benefit from using their first language to discuss and reflect on their learning experiences, express their ideas and opinions, or collaborate with peers. However, excessive use of the first language may hinder learners exposure and practice of the target language, so teachers should aim to gradually reduce reliance on it as learners become more proficient. Overall, a balanced use of the first language can help create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that promotes language acquisition and cultural understanding.

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