

The Sociocultural Perspective on the Use of L1 as a Supporting Tool for EFL Learning

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Abstract

Many English as a Foreign language (EFL) teachers think that a target language should be solely used as a medium of instruction to allow the learners to immerse in the target language. However, in the learning process, the learners learn about the language content and other cognitively-related skills such as discussion, reasoning, and evaluation to complete the tasks. Some tasks could be more challenging to understand, discuss, explain, or complete in learners' foreign language because they might need higher competence and fluency in the target language. This article attempts to review socioculturally informed research on the use of L1 in L2 or EFL classes and the features of English as a foreign language. The advantages of utilizing L1 in EFL courses will next be covered. The article will conclude with some advice that EFL teachers might utilize to increase their students' productivity in EFL classes by utilizing L1 as a supporting tool for language learning.

Keywords: sociocultural perspective, use of L1 in an FL classroom, EFL

1. Introduction

The proper use of the first language (L1) in a foreign language classroom has been a source of debate. According to some academics, L1 can be a useful tool for learners' cognitive processing of tasks involving the target language. Some contend that it is more advantageous for learners to get as much L2 exposure as possible. Exposure to the target language is one of the most crucial elements in learning a foreign language. However, opportunities for language learners to speak the target language outside of the classroom are scarce. Therefore, it is crucial for foreign language teachers to increase their students' opportunities and exposure to the target language (Solhi & Buyukyazi, 2011). One of the most popular methods teachers employ to give their students input about the target language environment is to hold courses in the target language. The children would gain from utilizing the target language in the classroom if it were well planned, organized, and taught to the right level of learners. The students have been exposed to pertinent information that could improve their proficiency and fluency in the target language.

Nevertheless, some foreign language education experts believe that allowing learners to complete some foreign language tasks in a shared L1 classroom would be more beneficial for the learners, particularly for tasks that call for a higher level of cognitive activities, like academic writing or critical conversation. Instead of utilizing L2 or a foreign language, learners will be better able to accomplish the activities if they are able to use L1. Due to their limited language proficiency and competency, the learners may require support to execute tasks in a foreign language.

Aside from the cognitive skills needed to complete the activities, various psychological aspects—such as attitude, affection, emotion, and motivation—have frequently been cited as crucial contributors to students' success. Teachers of foreign languages should be aware that these psychological aspects affect the students' efforts to study. The interaction between learners and their peers will be made easier if the L1 is permitted in a foreign language course. In addition, because a target language is still developing, low-proficient learners may feel intimidated by using it. Encouragement of the target language when the learners are not ready may therefore demotivate them.

It should be noted that the authors have no issues with students learning in the target language. However, before absolutely forbidding the use of L1 in a foreign language lesson, teachers must think very carefully. The purpose

of this academic article is to review the characteristics of English as a foreign language, review the literature on the use of L1 in EFL classrooms, present the use of L1 in the EFL classroom from the sociocultural perspective, and propose guidelines for the use of L1 in the EFL classroom.

2. English as a Foreign Language

Following Krachu's Circle Theory, Kunnawut (2011) divided English into three categories: English as a mother tongue, English as a second language, and English as a foreign language. English is not spoken in the territories as an official language or in everyday discourse, hence it is referred to as English as a foreign language, or EFL. There are many different goals for EFL students, such as understanding books and papers, communicating with foreigners, understanding music, movies, and television shows. In this situation, English is not a communication medium for connecting people or official interactions in this context. Several nations, including Thailand, Japan, and Vietnam, view English as a foreign language. Because they lack sufficient opportunities to consistently use the language, persons from these nations have low levels of general English competency and fluency.

According to Wharton (2004), learners of English as a foreign language require more chances to be exposed to significant material outside of the classroom. As a result, studying in an English-only classroom is viewed as being unauthentic in the context of EFL. The point of view is consistent with Forman (2010), who said that in a monolingual classroom where EFL is taught and learned, students constantly communicate their language and cultural viewpoints with teachers and other students, making the class bilingual rather than English-only (p.56). Thus, it is impossible to avoid using L1 in EFL classes.

3. The Use of L1 in the EFL Classrooms

Numerous researchers have looked into the usage of L1 in EFL courses, and they have all come to the conclusion that doing so may help students' cognitive development by supporting them as they analyze language data and deal with tasks that call for higher level cognitive activity. They stress that certain tasks occasionally call for a more complex cognitive process, and that learners may require assistance to do those cognitively challenging tasks in the target language (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Brook & Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

According to Brook & Donato (1994), the L1 in a foreign language classroom serves three purposes: (1) to comment on the students' use of the target language; (2) to ensure that all students understand the tasks they must complete; and (3) to provide the students with clear instructions and the task's objective. According to Swain & Lapkin (2000), the L1 would help the students with their L2 or FL activities, particularly for difficult assignments. Additionally, several research stressed that it is impossible to limit the use of L1 with low-proficient monolingual learners (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

According to Dornyei & Komos (1998), L2 learners utilizing L1 is viewed as a compensatory method for L2 communication. The concept is in line with Auerbuch's (1993) assertion about the benefits of the L1 in a foreign language classroom, including classroom management, language analysis, presenting grammar rules, talking about cross-cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, explaining learner's errors, and checking for comprehension. Schweers (1999) endorsed a favorable viewpoint about the use of Spanish as a first language in EFL classes.

Learning vocabulary is a key function of L1 in the FL classroom. To understand the meaning and application of the language set they are learning, the students constantly use their L1. L1 translation was shown to be the most successful approach of vocabulary learning among learners in a study evaluating the efficacy of the methods for learning the target language (Laufer & Shmueli, 1997). The effectiveness may be attributed to the L1 translation's accuracy, succinctness, and familiarity to learners; these qualities are crucial for picking up new terminology.

The usage of L1 in FL courses also helps students' other linguistic abilities. For instance, Knight's (1996) study found that L2 writing proficiency was stronger among learners who had prepared themselves for a conversation in their L1 than among those who had done so in the FL. According to Sevik's study from 2007, neither teachers nor students objected to the usage of L1 in foreign language classes, and the L1 also aids in the learning process for the success of the students. In their 2011 study on the topic, Solhi & Buyukyzai discovered that when L1 is permitted in the classroom, the students are more at ease. L1 is still helpful in FL learning, but teachers need to be careful when using it. Additionally, the learners demonstrated a favorable attitude toward using L1 to complete the L2 activities, according to Storch & Wigglesworth (2012). L1 continues to be crucial in maximizing student's proficiency in foreign languages as a result.

4. Sociocultural Perspective on the Use of L1 in the EFL Classrooms

The usage of L1 in EFL courses is viewed from the perspective of researchers in the Sociocultural theory of

language learning as a means of interaction and collaboration among the students. The L1 is a psychological device that mediates the inter- and intrapsychological actions of students. The L1 is a crucial step that enables learners to finish linguistic activities. According to Anton and Dicamilla (2002), the learners externalized their inner speech related to the task and cognitive processes using their L1.

According to the sociocultural paradigm, language serves as a mediator between social context and human actions, particularly cognitive ones. Lev Vygotsky and his associates believed that the kid needs to gain language development through scaffolding and support procedures because it is a normal and significant behavior (1930, p.10). The learners' cognitive process is impacted by the English language growth when we base our explanation on the sociocultural perspective of EFL development. For instance, the students begin with what is referred to as a "silent period" before moving on to self-talk or self-directed speaking. While performing L2 tasks, the learners must manage themselves. Assistance and support from teachers and peers, which are believed to be a social environment, is a process that could enhance the learners' development of their English language. The intricacy of interpersonal relationships, the process of cognitive growth, and the mediation mechanisms of the sociocultural framework are all heavily influenced by the social environment (Swain & Deters, 2007).

L1 serves as a mediator in EFL classes, assisting students in completing L2 assignments. Teachers can explain a complicated language structure to students or improve their language proficiency by using the L1 as a scaffolding technique relevant to the zone of proximal development (ZPD). As a result, under the direction of individuals with greater cognitive or language competencies, learners' capacity for language growth rises (in this context, teachers and peers). Peer interaction and task completion collaboration are crucial mediating mechanisms for language development. In a monolingual classroom, learners frequently communicate using their common first language. As a result, EFL instructors can direct students to use L1 as a tool to learn and comprehend the L2's linguistic structure and system.

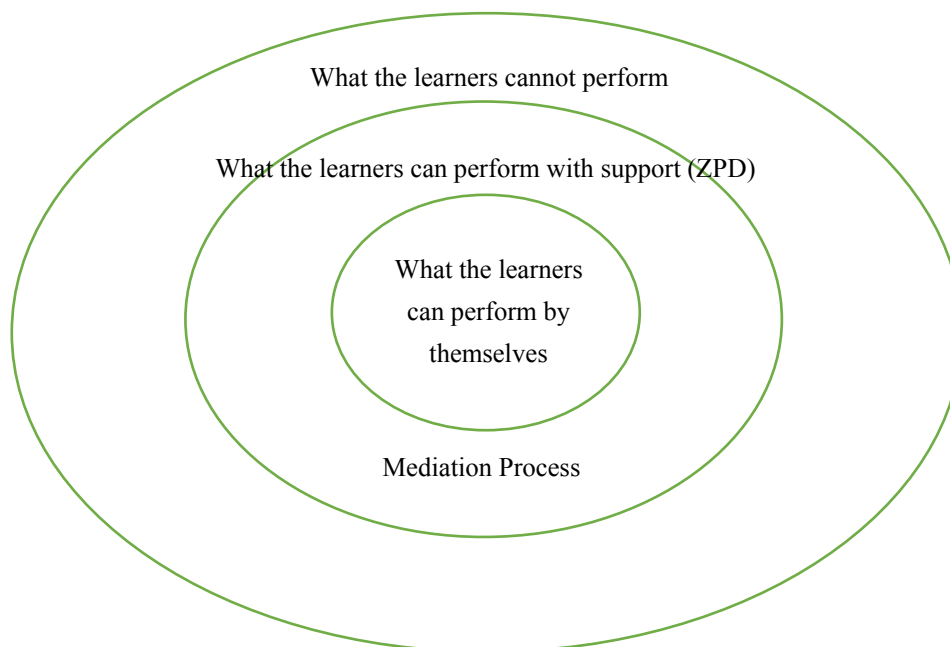


Figure 1. Zone of Proximal Development of the EFL learners

Therefore, from a sociocultural standpoint, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is situated between the performance levels of autonomous performance and performance with support. The contacts between supports and learners are crucial to the ZPD's consistency. Learning more and comprehending the complexity of the concepts and skills is facilitated by inconsistency. What the students previously accomplished with support would now be accomplished independently. A new learning environment will also cause the students to regress from autonomous learning to learning with support. For the learners to acquire greater knowledge, abilities, techniques, and learning quality, this cycle is continually repeated. According to Vygotsky, learners require a number of different things in order to move from their present schema to the ZPD and the subsequent level of knowledge. Language, social interaction, culture, imitation, guidance and assistance, and scaffolding are among the contributing variables.

Scaffolding is an interactive role that teachers (and people with higher levels of competence, fluency, and skills) play with learners. The former party supports the latter by using different mediating tools for challenges that the learners are facing so that the learners can solve the said problems on their own (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976, p. 98). Assisting, guiding, and supporting a learner while they are solving difficulties or learning are all included in scaffolding. In this way, the student progresses from the current ZPD to the following area. As a result, the learner must create a schema to comprehend how to approach the issues or activities methodically. Additionally, the learner will internalize what they discover during the exercise, and it will forevermore become their new schema.

Additionally, the new schema will serve as the ZPD for their subsequent level (Shabani, Mohammad, & Ebadi, 2010). In this way, the learner may keep track of their progress and see how confident they are in what they are learning. In the EFL classroom, the L1 is a crucial tool for helping students learn inside their ZPD and transfer their newly acquired schema to the following ZPD.

To acknowledge that linguistic repertoire can be used as a resource for language acquisition, academics have developed translanguaging pedagogy. In order to accomplish cognitive problems related to language learning, the learners might use their knowledge of the language they already speak. As a result, the L1 can be useful for encouraging the learning of both the L1 and other languages (Cenoz & Guter, 2021).

5. Instructions for Using L1 in the EFL Classes

Beginners with a relatively modest level of foreign competence and proficiency benefit from L1. If the learner was unfamiliar with the L2, utilizing L1 to describe it or to highlight L2 and L1's similarities and differences would help them comprehend the L2 better. Additionally, the L1 of the learners is constantly used to clarify grammatical differences between the target language and their L1. The learners will be helped to begin their lessons with confidence if L1 is used in this situation. They are not necessary to infer the main terminologies and grammatical constructions of the target language. Instead, the students can compare L1 and L2/FL using their L1 and L2, which will help them better comprehend L2.

Numerous academics have investigated the effects of L1 in FL classrooms and discovered that L1 still has value and assists students. Alhebaishi (2017), for instance, identified five goals for using L1 in FL classrooms, including (1) explaining difficult vocabulary, (2) explaining difficult grammar, (3) improving learners' text comprehension, (4) building a strong rapport with students, and (5) providing feedback on students' mistakes. In order to explain complex themes and problems that could be too difficult for the instructor to express in the L2 and for the students to comprehend, the teacher typically uses the L1. In other words, while employing the L2 as a communication tool for instruction, both the teacher and the students may experience communication barriers. Additionally, speaking in L1 lowers tension and fosters a positive rapport between the teacher and the students.

Izzati and Shafiai (2016) used the sociocultural theory as their study framework as they investigated L1 as a technique for improving low proficiency learners' English writing. When the students discussed their English lessons, the L1 was a useful tool. The results showed that the students utilized their first language (L1) to communicate in a group discussion because they had trouble pronouncing English words and phrases and needed better word selections to ensure mutual understanding between text sender and receiver. Additionally, the L1 serves as a vehicle for the students to practice other cognitive abilities like recalling, aiding, and correcting peers' work, comprehending the necessary tasks, and expressing thoughts throughout the conversation.

De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) investigated how frequently, for what purposes, and why the L1 was used in German classes. The results showed that L1 usage in classrooms varied between inexperienced and experienced teachers. When compared to beginner teachers, who utilized the L1 at a greater rate of 7.7-25.1%, experienced teachers used the L1 at a rate of roughly 4.6-13.8%. For the following reasons, L1 was used in a FL classroom: (1) to translate L2 materials; (2) to manage the classroom; (3) to make personal comments; and (4) to demonstrate the teacher's bilingualism. The results supported Zulfikar's (2019) assertion that it was impossible to avoid utilizing L1 in L2 classrooms. Because the L1 promotes L2 learning, it did not hinder FL learning. In the process of acquiring a language, L1 and L2 are inextricably linked. Additionally, the L1 still performs a variety of tasks for both teachers and students in EFL classes.

Yavuz (2012) conducted research on EFL teachers' perceptions on the psychological effects of employing L1 in FL courses. Explaining language structure was the primary duty of the L1 in the EFL classroom, and they were supportive of teaching English as a second language. Additionally, EFL instructors spoke of the psychological advantages of L1, including how learners experienced fewer language barriers in the classroom as a result of the target language-only rule, which made them anxious.

Hanif (2020) summarized the functions of the L1 in the FL classrooms as follows:

5.1 To Teach Vocabulary

Sampson (2012) and Cook & Hall (2012) assert that L1 is a potent tool and effective for teaching vocabulary. It saves time and makes learning vocabulary easier for the students when the teacher translates vocabulary from a foreign language into their first language. This perspective is consistent with Nation's assertion that teaching vocabulary through translation is the most successful method (see Cook & Hall, 2012).

5.2 To Do Code-switching between Languages

When describing grammatical concepts, directing class and greetings, and assisting learners' emotions, FL teachers frequently transition between the two languages. According to Macaro (2001), French EFL teachers chose to use their L1 while describing lessons about how to deal with language tasks. It is made clearer what they need to do the jobs by using the L1 instruction. Additionally, Liu, Ahn, and Baek discovered that Korean EFL teachers typically clarified grammatical errors in the Korean language. This is apparent in the setting of Korea (2004).

5.3 To Promote Learners' Positive Attitude

According to Yavuz (2012), EFL students showed less fear when teachers completed tasks in their first language. In a similar vein, instructors used the L1 to lower psychological obstacles for students or to calm them down before classes. L1 also acts as a tool to encourage the understanding of a shared identity between teachers and students (Sampson, 2012).

5.4 To Decrease Learners' Cognitive Loads

The L1 can be used by EFL teachers as a tool and a tactic to help students find solutions to language task questions. Because L1 does not require excessive cognitive load, it is more efficient and saves learners' time. For instance, in order to acquire a foreign language, low-proficiency students must double their cognitive workload, which includes thinking about task completion and deciphering the meaning of the foreign language. They can save their cognitive energy for task completion when the teacher teaches them in the L1. They will be able to finish the duties more quickly as a result. According to Cook & Hall (2012), the usage of L1 by EFL teachers helps students perform better when dealing with difficult and hard tasks.

5.5 To Stimulate Existing Schema and Background Knowledge

According to many academics, learning is most effective when students can integrate what they are learning with their prior knowledge or schema. The majority of humanistic and constructive academics share this opinion (Rostami, & Khadooji, 2010; Philip, 1995). As a result, learners can expand their schema or Vygotsky's ZPD by retrieving their previous schema using the L1.

6. The Use of L1 to Promote EFL Proficiency

The advantages of L1 in EFL classes have been suggested by numerous ESL and EFL academics (e.g., Cook & Hall, 2012; Copland & Neokleous, 2011; Haynes, 2021). They all concurred that since using L1 in the EFL classroom is unavoidable, we should establish the following techniques to use L1 as a mediating instrument for FL learning:

6.1 Create a Clear Policy Regarding the Language(s) that are Used in the Classroom

The teacher can explain to the students when it is appropriate to utilize their first language. The L1 is permitted, for instance, during brainstorming sessions or discussions.

6.2 Discuss with Students the Advantages of L1 in the EFL Classroom

In this manner, the students can maintain their pride in their L1 while learning about the significance of the English language as a tool for intercultural dialogue.

6.3 Support the Learners with Comprehensible Input

Because they need more assistance and scaffolding, the students frequently chose to speak in their first language. Teachers should therefore provide students with understandable and relevant input. It is important to assess students' schema and background knowledge so that teachers can use this data to support their next ZPD.

6.4 Allow the Learners to Complete Language Tasks in Small Groups

The instructor may permit the students to utilize their first language (L1) to gauge how well they comprehend the instructions or tasks they must carry out. The assignment can be completed in the target language once the

learners have been divided into groups. The teacher might permit students to utilize the L1 again for clarification of the notion or discussion points during debriefing. In order for the students to understand how to convey their views and thoughts in English, the teacher may repeat their points in that language.

6.5 Set a Specific Task for Practicing English

The instructor can then decide which language assignments must be completed entirely in English. However, in order to communicate those tasks in English, the teacher must make sure that the students fully comprehend the concepts and procedures.

6.6 Teachers need to Respect and be Aware of the Language-transferring Process

When dealing with the L2 tasks, learners must process two sets of language, of which the descriptions and features might differ. One language feature might appear when the learners practice another language, and this phenomenon is common. The EFL teachers might take this opportunity to enhance their fluency in the target language.

7. Conclusion

Although some EFL instructors feel that English should be the only language spoken in English-speaking classrooms, past research has shown that using L1 has benefits. An English-only policy is impractical in EFL classes for a variety of reasons, including the low competence levels of the students and the teachers' ability to keep the lesson entirely in English. Furthermore, inadequate exposure to and input of the target language is constantly held responsible for failed EFL learning. The language content, which includes grammatical rules and linguistic descriptions, is what the students in EFL classes acquire in addition to English language abilities. The more advanced cognitive processes, such as conversation, brainstorming, reasoning, or evaluation, are always needed for the latter linguistic components. To complete these cognitively challenging tasks, the students must employ their cognitive processes. As a result, completing work in the target language presents difficulties for EFL learners. The learners will have the chance to complete tasks more successfully if given the opportunity to accomplish language activities with the L1 in a more proper and organized manner.

In addition, EFL teachers may use L1 as a mediating tool to promote learners' achievements. The learners can use their L1 to construct new knowledge in their ZPD of the target language, thus allowing them to attain the new schema or the next ZPD through the scaffolding process. From the perspective of scholars of the Sociocultural approach, we cannot prohibit using L1 in foreign language classrooms because L1 serves as an important tool for the learners to acquire the target language. This conclusion is in line with Stern (1992 as cited in Mart, 2013) states that the "connection between the L1 and L2 is an indisputable truth, albeit we like it or not that the new constructive knowledge (including language contents and skills) of the learners is based on their previous attained language (p. 9)."

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