

What Every EFL Teacher Should Know about Using the Mother Tongue

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Should I give a direct translation of an English word when my learners do not understand?

Should I use the mother tongue in presenting a language structure that does not exist in L1?

Should I translate instructions into L1 in a written test?

Should I use English or mother tongue in setting discipline problems?

I am sure there are more SHOULDs that worry EFL teachers all over the world. My article is concerned with the role of the mother tongue in teaching and learning English. It summarises general opinions on this topic and focuses on effective ways of using L1 as a valuable tool in facilitating learning English as well.

It goes without saying that the best way of learning a foreign language is to stay for a long period of time in a target language country. Unfortunately not many of our learners had or have an opportunity to experience learning English this way. Most of them have to undergo that well-known painful process of sitting and studying it at home or in the classroom. The higher our level of English is the more we realize how L1 hinders or accelerates our learning. The move from intermediate to higher levels of competence in English is closely associated with the ability to make choices regarding vocabulary and collocation. While in the early stages of study this is not an issue, the more advanced learner is constantly using L1 knowledge to help make these choices. The use and influence of L1 simply cannot be neglected.

On the one hand, in the past, the L1 was seen as an integral part of the teaching (the Grammar Translation Method). On the other hand, this use of L1 was later rejected as a phenomena that hinders and slows foreign language learning. In current reference books on the EFL methodology, we can

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find suggestions on how the teacher can avoid using L1 more frequently than how to use it effectively. One obvious reason is that a vast majority of native teacher do not speak the language of their learners. In the past, the mother tongue was an integral part of locally published course –books used at all levels (Strakova 2001). At the same time translation from and to L1 had a long history in European educational culture and it was quite a common classroom activity in the past. At present new teaching ideas and materials has led to a rejection of mother tongue in Slovakia. However, it seems we are rediscovering its value at present.

In general there are two major trends nowadays. The first one suggests that English should be the only means of communication in the classroom. In fact there are many teachers who feel guilty about saying a word in L1. They feel it is old fashioned and not in keeping with modern trend. Using English exclusively is the only way to fulfil all the principles and requirements of the revered communicative approach. The second trend is represented by those teachers who from time to time use L1 in the classrooms for various reasons such as checking understanding, clarifying meaning, chatting and so on.

In my opinion both trends are natural and teachers or supporters of either group can be identified all over the world.

The first opinion is underpinned by the following arguments:

- listening to English is learning English
- teacher's use of L2 is a natural and real example of language that learners are exposed to
- use of L2 helps to create a foreign language atmosphere in the classroom and helps learners to adapt to real situations outside the classroom

The second opinion is underpinned by the following arguments:

- using L1 is sometimes more efficient in terms of time
- some learners prefer “to translate”

- L1 gives less capable learners an opportunity to show they are intelligent – translate a word or a sentence, shout out a solution in L1 etc.

From our perspective a third argument – we can say a humanistic one – seems to be very strong as we try to bring humanism back into the school the classroom situations when L1 can function effectively can be listed as follows:

- presenting and practicing language items
- eliciting English
- giving or checking instructions
- checking understanding in general
- using translation activities
- using dictionaries
- giving and getting feedback

Obviously, all of this can be done in English with higher level students. However, in some situations, careful use of L1 will help learners to get the maximum benefit from the lesson. Perhaps the most important point to be made on the rights and wrongs of using the mother tongue is that teachers should keep in mind the aim of the lesson, the level of students, stages of the lesson, learning activities and mood of the learners. They have to be very flexible and try to react properly to every situation in the classroom.

This article has taken a broad, generalized and, I hope, balanced view. I would like to highlight the word **BALANCED** as this is the approach we should adopt when using L1 in the classroom. The teacher should use all the means at hand for the learner to achieve all that he or she is capable of achieving and L1 can be one of the tools that makes it happen.

Reference

Strakova, Zuzana (2001). *Ucebnica v teorii a praxi*. Metodike centrum. Prešov.