

English Language Teaching in China: Theories on the Role of the First Language in the Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Using first language (L1) in second language (L2) teaching is a hotly studied topic. In the early nineteenth century, the grammar-translation method considered L1 as a medium of instruction, and L1 could be used to communicate in a foreign language classroom. As communication opportunities increased in the late nineteenth century, the direct method was developed, which considered that foreign languages could be taught without the L1. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, research suggested that the use of L1 should be reconsidered. Unfortunately, the role of L1 is little addressed in the context of speaking lessons in China. This paper casts doubt on the avoidance of using L1 in class and delves into how L1 can optimize English language learning in the anticipated teaching context of a speaking lesson in China.

1. Introduction

Imagine an English class in China: Students are going to take the first English class in their life. The teacher stands on the platform, staring down at his or her new students, and says, “Everyone, we are here to learn English. From now on, you are not allowed to use Chinese in this room. This is an English-only class.” The class is lost from that moment [1]. Where did the idea that English should be the only language in the classroom come from? Since the 1880s, based on the Direct Method, most teaching approaches and methods have avoided using first language (L1) in the second language (L2) teaching [2]. According to Howatt & Widdowson, the monolingual principle, which espouses the exclusion of mother tongue or previously acquired languages from the classroom, is the basis of language teaching [3]. However, is L1 worth nothing in English language teaching? What is the place of using students’ L1 in the English language classroom? How can L1 apply to the Chinese context? This essay challenges the view that L1 should be avoided in the language classroom and explores how L1 can enhance SLA in the teaching context of a speaking class in China.

2. Overview of L1 in Approaches and Methods

2.1. The Value of L1

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) dominated language teaching during the early nineteenth century [4]. GTM focuses on grammar explanation and translation exercises. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) [5], the goal of GTM is to read and understand literature that is written in the target language. Therefore, the role of students' L1 was the medium of instruction, and L1 can be used to communicate with each other in class. Considering the crucial role of students' L1 in GTM, some researchers have shown that L1 offers students a better acquisition of English. First, providing the meaning of words or phrases in L1 enhances comprehension. For example, Ismail conducted a study about suggested guidelines for using translation in the foreign language and teaching in Saudi Arabia [6]. The data proved that 84.21% of teachers, who are native speakers of Arabic, prefer to use L1 for explaining new words and phrases. Besides studying students' responses to the use of L1, Schweers, in his research, reported that L1 can facilitate learners' comprehension of words [7]. It is helpful to ensure that the students are not getting the wrong meaning of words.

Second, L1 helps teachers explicate English grammar. For example, Aqel (2013) conducted a contrastive study towards using GTM or using only English in teaching English grammar for 10th-grade Jordanian students [8]. It revealed that group A students who are allowed to use L1 in class outperformed group B, which was taught only English. What is more, by comparing the grammar of English and mother tongue, students would become more familiar with their native language [5].

Third, not only in GTM but L1 can also be used to understand the requirement of tasks in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). A study conducted by Cohen revealed that students tend to use L1 when they encounter a conceptual difficulty [9]. Furthermore, according to Storch & Wigglesworth (2003) [10], students noted that their L1 would have helped them finish their tasks more efficiently. Thus, the L1 use in class has real benefits in language teaching.

2.2. The Shortage of L1

In examining the disadvantages of L1 use in English language teaching, one of the early theories, behaviourism, must be mentioned. This theory states that the process of L2 learning is the formation of habits, and the habits of the L1 are often detrimental to the learning of the new habits of the L2 [11]. Behaviourists pointed out that the primary obstacle to learning L2 was interference from L1 [4].

Second, Audiolingualism is mainly an oral method of teaching. It was suggested that the L2 should be the sole language used in the classroom. Hence, L1 use in an audiolingual lesson may reduce L2 input and go against the rationale of the Audiolingual Method to develop English-speaking skills.

Besides, another approach, called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), also concludes that L1 use in class should be as little as possible. CLT focuses on developing learners' communicative competence, which states that learning a language is more than just knowing grammar rules but also includes how to use the language [12]. Therefore, using L1 should be minimized in the communicative classroom.

3. Focusing on China

Compared to the world-leading literature above, this issue should be more precise: focus on

national English syllabus and English curriculum standards in China, the attitude of teachers and students towards L1 use in the classroom, and regional differences of Chinese junior high school.

3.1. English Syllabus and Curriculum Standards in China

People can get nine years of compulsory education in China. Since 2001, the government's line has been that English should be taught early at the age of eight or nine, in Grade three of the national education system [13]. The status of English in China is more important than any other foreign language. Hence, China's Ministry of Education issued a series of documents for English language teaching and learning.

On the one hand, based on the English Syllabus of nine-year compulsory education in China, the National Department of Education suggests that English should be utilized in class as much as possible. English teaching aims to establish a direct connection between English knowledge and students' real life. Likewise, the English curriculum standards clarify that teachers should create opportunities for students to practice English in the classroom. Teachers should aim to teach his or her students how to communicate in English, not how to do grammar exercises, and show real communicative situations that learners can use in daily life [14].

On the other hand, China's Education Ministry does not forbid the use of L1 in class. The national English Syllabus recommends that for certain teaching contents that cannot be clearly explained in English, L1 can be used appropriately. Besides, the vocabulary index in most government-approved coursebooks also indicates that L1 use is necessary. Many of the words are translated into Chinese accordingly. Therefore, L1 should be allowed to use in class when speakers feel unable to express by English, and the great value of using L1 lies in releasing students from the ambiguity of the L2 [8]. The role of L1 should not be neglected in China's context.

3.2. The Attitude of Students and Teachers towards L1

Tang surveyed 100 Chinese EFL students [15]. The result showed that 70% of students said that Chinese should be used in English classrooms. Furthermore, 97% of them requested that their teachers communicate in Chinese. According to them, Chinese was beneficial for clarifying difficult grammar points and introducing new vocabulary items. Wang conducted a similar survey in a junior high school [16]. The findings revealed that 92.7% of students said that they could accept teachers' use of Chinese in English classes to a certain extent. They stated that L1 was an indispensable tool in the English classroom. However, the research also notes that some students held a negative attitude towards using L1 in English classrooms. They were reluctant to use Chinese and did not want to spend their time communicating in Chinese. As Macaro stressed in his study, second language learning is best achieved through communicative interaction, which means that students communicate primarily in the L2 [17].

Teachers confirm that the use of English should be maximised, and they generally prefer the usage of L2. Nevertheless, they also consider the role of L1 in English language teaching as supportive and facilitating. Some teachers noted that the L1 needed to be permitted to sustain students' attention and involvement. According to Tang (2002) [15], some Chinese teachers thought Chinese should be used in class. They believed it was necessary to help students understand complex concepts and ideas. The primary purpose of L1 is to make the target language understandable. Teachers should not wholly forbid the use of some L1 in group and pair work but should accept that using L1 may be a normal mental process that enables learners to initiate or sustain speaking engagement [10]. However, as Cook (2001) noted [2], even though L1 can be used in some scenarios, teachers must remember that their primary responsibility is to teach the target language and that L2 usage should be prioritised. The use of L1 use should always contribute to L2

acquisition.

3.3. Regional Differences of Chinese Junior High School

In the context of junior high school, it is necessary to notice the gap in English language education quality between developed and undeveloped areas. According to Yin, urban and rural areas are different in the educational field [18]. Teachers in rural areas often have a series of problems such as ageing, low academic qualifications, insufficient teaching ability, etc. There is a scenario in rural education in China: it is difficult to recruit high-quality teachers due to rural poverty. On the occasion of a teacher shortage, some teachers of other subjects (mainly Chinese teachers) are changed to English subjects after a short training period. These teachers lack formal English education and have insufficient English proficiency [19].

Besides, many children in developed cities begin to recognise essential English words at a young age and enrol in various forms of tutoring. In contrast, things are looking grim for rural students. Furthermore, many rural parents, who are occupied with numerous farming activities, are not well-educated, and they rarely have time to pay attention to their children's education. Therefore, it is hard to apply to English-only classes in such a situation. These evidence call monolingual approaches into question in the context of China.

4. L1 Use in China

4.1 Use L1 Wisely

Many teachers hold a pragmatic view of L1 usage, believing it was unavoidable. They admitted that contributions to the L1 were necessary to keep students' attention, interest, and involvement.

4.1.1 Explain L2 Vocabulary and Grammar

When encountering new words that are difficult to explain in English, the L1 can be used in class. For instance, when students learn the word "vinegar", it is unrealistic for teachers to take the vinegar to the classroom. If teachers just show pictures to the class, students may mistake it for soy sauce or black liquid. In this case, the teacher can convey the meaning of the word in Chinese.

4.1.2 Ensure that Instruction is Conveyed Successfully

In the speaking lesson, some tasks should be given to students. Students need to understand the tasks they need to complete. For example, students should work in groups of four and write down what they know about everyday kitchenware. If the students look confused about the instruction, the teacher can translate it into Chinese (L1) and ensure that every student understands it clearly.

When used appropriately and moderately, L1 does not impede learning; rather, it assists the teaching and learning process, providing the instructor with a useful pedagogical tool for optimising learning results.

4.2 Strategies to Encourage L2 Use in Class

Although L1 has some advantages in English classes, there is undoubtedly a need to maximise the use of the L2 during the limited available classroom hours [20]. The following measures can encourage L2 use in class.

4.2.1 Appointing English Language Monitors

The teacher may assign “language monitors”, who are designated students tasked with the responsibility of reminding their classmates to use English. Such a method provided students with some responsibilities [21]. For example, the students are divided into a study group of five, and one of the students acts as the “language monitor” and records the use of English in class [22].

4.2.2 Reward-penalty Mechanism

Teachers can use a reward-penalty mechanism. Such as an incentive system in which students can win stickers, stamps, or gifts for L2 use. If they overuse the L1 in the classroom, they will be assigned more homework. Learners must recognise that there must be a limit to their usage of L1 in order to reap the benefits of the language without undermining the necessary L2 input [23].

5. Conclusion

In summary, Chinese as L1 is still widely used in English classrooms, and both teachers and students respond favourably to a reasonable amount of L1 use. L1 may be utilised in English classrooms because it aids students’ learning and comprehension of English. L1 should be integrated into an English language curriculum. However, the L1’s role should be limited to being facilitative and compensatory. The L1 should not be totally banned or over-reliant in English language lessons in China. Moreover, as with any tool, it can be used effectively or ineffectively. Whether it is beneficial or damaging depends entirely on the purpose for which it is utilised. Finally, Teachers could use English as much as possible in class but could also use Chinese (L1) as an auxiliary teaching language. They could begin the first English lesson: “Everyone, we are here to learn English. Let us do whatever is necessary.”

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