

Use of L1 in the higher education L2 classroom

Uso de la L1 en el aula de L2 en la enseñanza superior

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Abstract

The use of the L1 in the classroom is an issue that all second/foreign (L2) teachers have faced because it is not clear when and how to use the first language when teaching a L2. This descriptive research seeks to determine how and when professors of higher education use the first language when teaching English as a L2. The population are 22 professors working with young adults and adults belonging to bachelor's degree at public universities and Language Centers in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México. The instrument applied is an online survey with five questions. The results conclude that not all the professors use the first language in the classroom and think the use of the L1 is incorrect because does not promote the L2 in the students and the students do not have enough practice. On the other hand, most of the teachers that participated in this research agree with the use of L1 for explanations; and to save time, especially when the groups are large, overall, when the students are beginners. Moreover, this discussion continues open especially when considering the length teachers should use the L1 during the lessons because according to the data obtained, some of the professors use the L1 less than 15 minutes per class, but the average is around 15-30 minutes per hour, which could represent a problem. Then, it is important to reflect on the topic to learn how to deal with it and take the best decision to improve the students' confidence and improve their learning of the L2.

Keywords: code-switching, factors, group work, learning strategy, target language.

Resumen

El uso de la L1 en el aula es un problema al que todos los profesores de inglés como segunda lengua (L2) se han enfrentado porque no está claro cuándo y cómo utilizar la primera lengua al enseñar una L2. Esta investigación descriptiva pretende determinar cómo y cuándo los profesores de educación superior utilizan la primera lengua cuando enseñan inglés como L2. La población son veintidos profesores que trabajan con jóvenes y adultos pertenecientes a licenciaturas en universidades públicas y Centros de Idiomas en Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México. El instrumento aplicado es una encuesta en línea con cinco preguntas. Los resultados concluyen que no todos los profesores utilizan la primera lengua en el aula y piensan que el uso de la L1 es incorrecto porque no promueve la L2 en los alumnos y éstos no tienen suficiente práctica. Por otro lado, la mayoría de los profesores que participaron en esta investigación están de acuerdo con el uso de la L1 para las explicaciones; y para ahorrar tiempo, especialmente cuando los grupos son grandes, en general, cuando los alumnos son principiantes. Por otra parte, este debate sigue abierto sobre todo cuando se considera la duración que los profesores deben utilizar la L1 durante las clases, ya que, según los datos obtenidos, algunos de los profesores utilizan la L1 menos de 15 minutos por clase, mientras que la media se sitúa en torno a los 15-30 minutos por hora, lo que podría representar un problema. Entonces, es importante reflexionar sobre el tema para saber cómo abordarlo y tomar la mejor decisión para mejorar la confianza de los alumnos y mejorar su aprendizaje de la L2.

Palabras clave: Cambio de código, estrategia de aprendizaje, factores, trabajo grupal, idioma de destino.

Introduction

Traditionally the way of learning a second language was through the Grammar Translation Method (GMT) using the L1 to explain the use and function of L2. After some time, this method was considered old fashioned and was disregarded because of the use of the mother tongue. However, it continues being used, and one of several research showed that "...the Grammar Translation Method (GMT) is a suitable approach for teaching grammar to college

students. The students ... became more interested in grammar lessons. The result ... also indicates that it is a suitable teaching approach that can meet students' needs" (Chang, 2011, pp.20,21).

According to the theories that preceded the GMT, the focus changed to the use of L2 avoiding the use of L1 trying to represent an immersive experience through using exclusively the L2. However, research has shown that in many foreign language settings, teacher and learners use their first language far more than the target language depending on the following factors (Almoayidi, 2018; Cambridge, 2019; De la Campa and Nassaji, 2009; Hancock, 1997):

- The type of activity
- How the teacher believes the students learn best
- How the teacher views the role of the first and the target language
- How the students view the role of the first and the target language.

Those factors show that teachers need to observe not only the theories and methods for teaching L2 but also what the students do, the tasks, and of course the students and how they feel and think about the use of L1 when learning the L2. The type of activity is important because can determine how the students work, individually or in groups. Some students feel insecure because do not understand the topic, the rules or the explanation and cannot express it or ask their doubts. According to Carson and Kashihara "Regarding instructive use of L1, beginner students hope to rely on L1 support in class more than advanced students. This pattern can be seen with explaining difficult concepts in class and defining new words" (2012, p. 46).

Also, Zulfikar, states that "For learners with limited L2 proficiency, this situation can be restraining since they are unable to express themselves very well. They may have difficulty understanding a concept, but fear of being reprimanded for using their L1" (2019, p.44).

In order to go deeper into the subject, the following is an analysis of the elements that are important to include when using the L1 in the classroom, which are code-switching and the use of L1 when working in groups.

Code Switching

Code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages frequently between L1 to L2. According to Turnbull (2001) research into code-switching has revealed that when the teacher uses more of the target language in class, the learners' proportion of target language use also increase. That means that L1 should be used only, when necessary, and that use of the L2 should be predominant to encourage its use among the students in the classroom. Alton (2021) expresses that:

Code-switching can be used for drawing attention of learners to content information. Explanation of new subject matter by using L1 contributes to understanding of new materials. Another function of code-switching is its use for reinforcing and emphasizing the messages which learners fail to understand (p. 25).

Bensen (2013) explains that "When teachers encourage negotiation between languages by reinforcing the practice of code-switching, students' understanding, which leads to participation and motivation, is enhanced" (p. 80).

Code switching is a process that happens when the students are learning a foreign language, even though during this research it is not the main focus but it is related to the topic because of the use of L1 during the classroom and contributes to the theory of learning process.

Using The L1 In The Classroom

Atkinson (1987) as cited in Bane and Kitila (2003) states that there are three possible reasons for allowing limited L1 use in the classroom:

- 1) It is a "learner preferred strategy". When the opportunity emerges, learners will choose to translate without encouragement from the teacher, particularly at lower levels. So, teachers should try to work with this tendency rather than against it. This element is common, some students say the rules or words in the L1, use an online translator, or ask their classmates what the translation of texts, and tasks are
- 2) Allowing students to use their L1 is a humanistic way of teaching because it allows students to say what they want and avoid frustration. Indeed, this reason is important

to take in account. Of course, according to the level of L2, the teacher could regulate the use of L1, for example, if the student is a beginner will need to use more L1 than an intermediate level student

- 3) Use of L1 explanation can save time. There are some grammar rules that are difficult to explain. Then, sometimes is easier to explain it using the L1, so the students can understand it and use the time to practice and do activities

Besides those reasons, it is important, to comment that the updated Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020) expands the concept and scope of the term mediation into three categories:

- a) Mediating a text
- b) Mediating concepts and
- c) Mediating communication

Mediation is the use of the L1 when teaching the L2 “... the user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes across modalities” (p. 90)

Then, the use of L1 is important and necessary because it helps students and teachers to convey meaning and instructions. It can be considered as a medium to help students understand better as it will be discussed below.

Using The L1 In Group Work When Working In Groups

When working in groups some students use their native language because they consider it natural and easier. Hancock (1997) points out that learners use both the L1 and the target language in group work depending on several factors; he calls this code-switching “layering”. Layering depends on the speakers’ definitions, or perceptions of the types of activities they are engaged in. Kwon (2014) presents that

students’ use of their L1 is not always negative... If the activities are meaning-focused and the students are not fluent enough to only discuss in their L2, there is no reason for the teacher to prevent the students from using their L1 (p. 114).

Rance-Roney (2010) says that in high school groups, “English accuracy may be facilitated through the use of the L1 to scaffold the L2. Furthermore, when the academic task requires the cognitive processing of highly abstract information” (p. 24)

Then, it depends on the students the use of L1 and L2, sometimes they can use more one or the other, depending on the activity. Also, the use of the L2 depends on the knowledge and mastery of the L2. If the students have studied the target language and they are used to perform and do activities using the L2 they will continue using it when working in groups.

Almoayidi (2018) states that “exposing learners to L2 only is the appropriate teaching method for most of learners and in many contexts. Regardless of learners’ purposes to learn English ...” (p. 378). Meyers (2008) concludes that “The use of the L2 should be maximized whenever possible. The L1’s primary role is to supply scaffolding to lower affective filters by making the L2 and the classroom environment comprehensible” (p.157)

Also, “teachers must be aware about all these elements and factors when teaching. teachers should consider their teaching environment when try to use student’s L1, including course objectives, students’ proficiency, and students’ willingness and attitude to use L1” (Wang, 2022, p. 48).

There must be an analysis of the students’ level, the activities, the class’s objectives, and the students’ needs, to plan the lesson and consider when can be necessary to use the L1, so the students can understand the topic and do the tasks.

There are teachers that use the L1 in class, they like to explain and give examples using the mother tongue. Taşçı and Ataç (2020) established that “although the primary aim in the classroom is to maximize the teaching of L2, there is no consensus about the proportion of L1 used in classes”. Also, Yavuz considers that “ELT teachers emphasize the necessary use of L1 in structural teaching ...and that ELT teachers prefer using L1, which breaks the psychological barriers before the teaching begins and that the use of L1 creates a low anxiety atmosphere” (2012, p.4339). In practice, some of the teachers use the L1 to translate the L2, explaining in L2 and then translating into L1 or vice versa.

This can be an important approach when the students are beginners because they need to understand, comment on their doubts, ask for information; additionally, by using the

L1 they can feel secure and less anxious. De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) state that a variety of factors influenced the instructors' decisions about when, how, and why they used L1 in their teaching. Some of these factors were based on personal beliefs about language learning and teaching; others considered the instructors' classroom settings, their students, and the courses (p. 756).

It is important to understand that there is a wide variation in the amount of L1 use by English language teachers. There are classes where it is used for as much as 90% of the time, and others where it is never used. More commonly, it seems that the L1 is typically used somewhere between 20% and 40% of the time when there is a shared L1 or classroom language (Cambridge, 2019, p. 4).

For most teachers in most contexts, some degree of L1 use is a feature of their everyday classroom practice. Then, "the use of L1 in FL classrooms is justified, but none of its supporters endorse its unlimited use" (Yi-chin & Yi-chun, 2010)

As claimed by Cadena, Damian and Tacoama (2018) "during the adaptation stage in the contact or initial levels the use of L1 is necessary, but unluckily sometimes its use is abused by learners and instructors" (p. 10)

On the report of those statements and teacher's beliefs, we can find teachers that do not let their students to speak in the native language, and they explain everything in the L2 because according to their consideration or experience this is the best way the student is going to learn the target language, either because the classroom is the only place they can listen to, or use it by interacting with the teacher and their classmates, among other factors. These ideas can be true, but it is important to consider that not all the students react in the same way because not all of them are homogeneous. Some students feel frustrated, they do not understand, or can feel angry, leading to the disinterest in learning the L2.

As we can see the use of L1 and the time of use during the class continues to be controversial, there are opinions for and against the use. Especially about the amount of time in which the mother tongue should be used. Depending more on teachers' beliefs and other factors that have been addressed in the previous paragraphs.

Methodology

The objective of the research is to determine how and when teachers use their first language in the classroom.

This research is descriptive and was conducted during the semester August – December 2022, the population are 22 teachers belonging to language centers of universities who teach to young adults and adults enrolled in bachelor's degrees in the University of Science and Arts in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, México.

Some of the factors that Atkinson (1987), Rance-Roney (2010) and De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) established, were used to formulate the questions. The instrument used is a survey that contains a general information section about the age, sex, and time of teaching; and 5 questions, 1 dichotomic and 4 multiple choice type, and it was applied online. In questions 2, 3 and 5, participants can select more than one option. The questions are presented below:

- 1) Do you use the L1 in the classroom?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

If the answer is not, continue with question number 3.

- 2) What are the reasons to use the L1 in the classroom?
 - a) To give confidence to the students
 - b) To save time
 - c) To explain the topics and instructions
 - d) To avoid misunderstandings
- 3) What are the reasons to not use the L1 in the classroom?
 - a) Students do not get used to the language
 - b) The use of L1 do not promote learning of L2
 - c) Students do not practice the L2
- 4) How much do you use the L1 during an average class hour?
 - a) 5-15 minutes
 - b) 15-30 minutes
 - c) More than 30 minutes

5) To which levels do you teach English?

- a) Elementary
- b) Basic
- c) Intermediate
- d) More than one level (mixed)

To process the information, the surveys were elaborated in Google Forms, collected and tabulated according to the answers. Then, they were consolidated to present the results in a graphic way to facilitate the analysis and get the conclusions.

Results

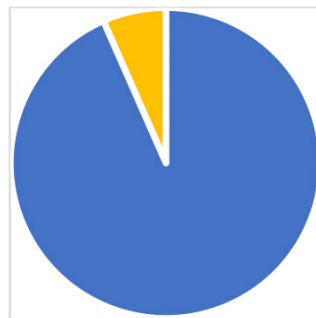
The general information section showed the next data:

- a) The average age of teachers is 38 years old.
- b) The 60% of teachers are women, and the rest men.
- c) The average number of years of teaching is 12.
- d) The average number of years of teaching in higher education is 9.

The results of the questions 1-5 are shown graphically below.

Figure 1

Use of L1 in the classroom

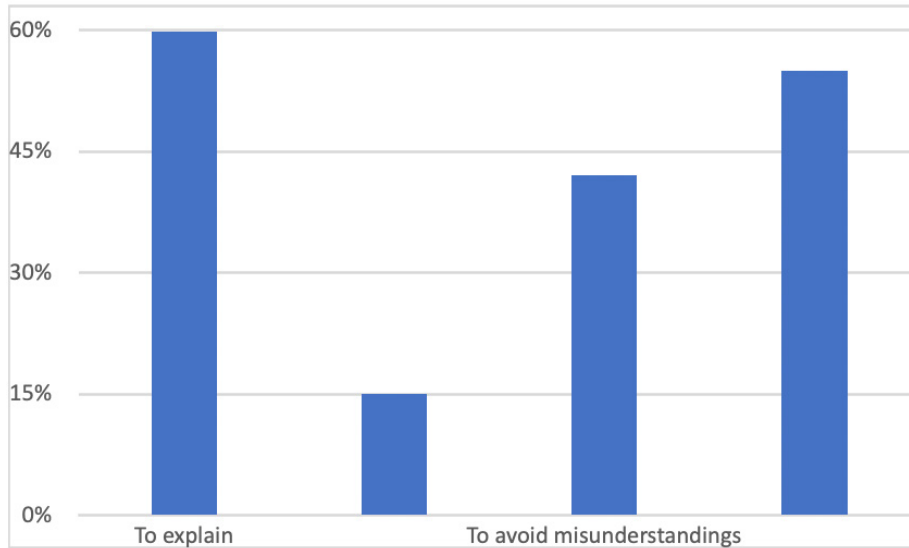


Note. Own elaboration

The 81.5 % of teachers answered that they use the L1 in the classroom, and the 19.5 % said they do not.

Figure 2

Reasons to use the L1 in the classroom

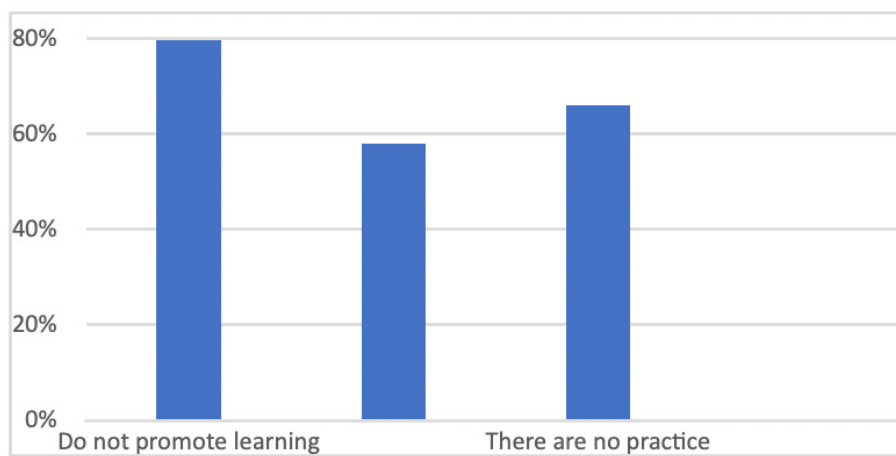


Note. Own elaboration

The main reason to use the L1 in the classroom is to explain the topics and instructions, secondly to save time, thirdly to avoid misunderstandings, and finally to give confidence to the students.

Figure 3

Reasons to not use L1 in the classroom

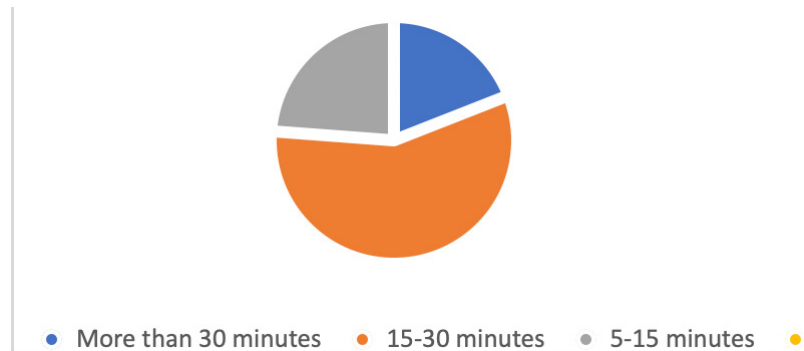


Note. Own elaboration

The teachers that do not use the L1 in the classroom stated that the reasons are 80 % do not promote learning of L2, 58 % because the students do not get used to L2, and 66 % because the students do not practice L2.

Figure 4

Use of L1- Percentage of time

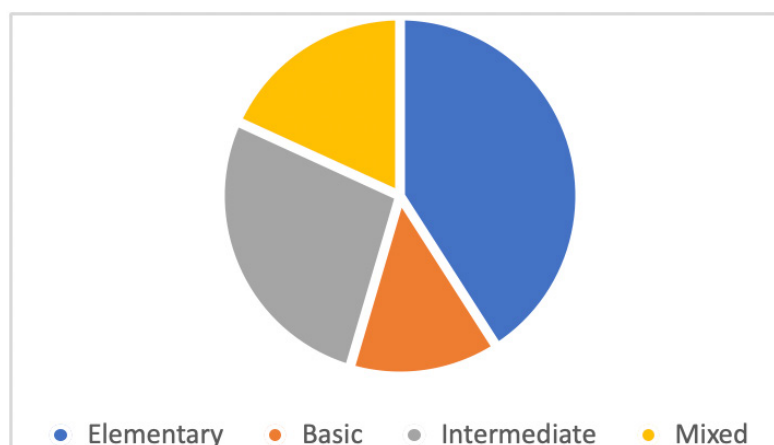


Note. Own elaboration

The percentage of time is calculated from an average hour class. 19% use the L1 more than 30 minutes, 24 % 5 -15 minutes and 57 % between 15-30 minutes.

Figure 5

Levels of English teaching



Note. Own elaboration

41 % of teachers teach the elementary level of English, 14 % basic, 27 % intermediate and 18 % in more than one level.

Discussion

As mentioned above, when and how to use the L1 during the process of teaching the L2 is difficult to establish. According to the results, some teachers can use it to explain the class, while others use only the L2. The general information data shows that it is possible to assert the teachers who participated in the survey have experience teaching at the higher level due to the number of years they have collaborated at this level. This is important because they are knowledgeable about the academic and student environment at the higher level, according to Wang (2022) teachers should consider their teaching environment when try to use student's L1.

Other important findings are the next:

- a) 81.5 % of teachers use the L1 in the classroom (Figure 1), and 41% of them teach the elementary and 14% the basic level (Figure 5), which can explain the use of L1 because the students on these levels generally lack vocabulary and grammar. The Figure 2 shows the reasons to use the L1, the main reasons are to explain, avoid misunderstandings and save time
- b) Other important element is the time the teachers use the L1 during the class, as it can be seen in Figure 4, 57% of teacher use it between 15-30 minutes, 24% between 5-15% and 19% more than 30 minutes. Even though the use can seem too much (more than 30 minutes), most of the use of L1 in the class (57%) can be considered that belongs to the media, between 20% - 40% of the time (12-24 minutes), as it was stated by Cambridge (2019)
- c) Some results can be an issue (19% of teachers use the L1 more than 30 minutes), overall because it seems the time can be excessive and as it can be stated previously, the use of L1 cannot be unlimited (Yi-chin & Yi-chun, 2010)
- d) About the teachers that do not use the L1 in the classroom, the Figure 3 presents the reasons, the most important is the teachers think the use of L1 do not promote the learning of the L1, secondly, the students do not practice, which means that it is considered the classroom is the main place to use the L2, and lastly, because the learners do not get used to use the L2 instead L1.

Conclusions

As it has been asserted, the use of L1 in the classroom is a topic that has not been resolved, but it can be necessary to apply it as Mart (2013) says “The use of L1 has been considered as detrimental in ESL classes; on the contrary, mother tongue plays a crucial and facilitative tool in foreign learning process” (p.13).

Also, its use and importance has been recognized by the Council of Europe and included (in a chapter called mediation) in an expanded criteria and approach in the revised Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.

According to the theoretical framework revised, there are several factors that lead to the teachers to use the L1 in the classroom. Among them, we can find activities tasks explanations, grammar explanations, limited time to explain, and personal beliefs (Saruwatashi, 2020), Kjøstvedt (2020), De la Campa and Nassaji (2009). On the other hand, the students generally have positive perceptions toward utilizing L1 in L2 classes. while some teachers are eager toward using L1 in their classes (Tajgozari, 2017).

The results of the research show that those factors are considered by the teachers that took the survey. Another important factor when using the L1 is the time of use during the class. Results show a similarity to the reported by Cambridge (2019) and can be directly linked to the level of English the teachers are teaching. 65 % of teachers are working with beginners and basic English groups. So, they need to use more L1 to explain and give instructions (Cadena, Damian and Tacoama, 2018). Along the same lines, we can find the lack of time, which is one of the reasons teachers use to speak in the L1 and can avoid the misunderstandings and do not need to reexplain the topics.

To conclude, there are some elements to consider:

- a) It is necessary to evaluate the students' level and the type of activity among other factors to decide when to use the L1 and the way of use. The students need to understand the grammar rules and feel capable of use the L2. Of course, it is necessary to practice and encourage them to use the L2 (Yavuz, 2012), not only in individual activities but also when interacting with their classmates

- b) Working on groups students can be exposed to use more the L1 but teachers should not be worried, according to Gorbhani (2011), his study showed “... that not all uses of L1 needs a remedy since in real classroom discourse, when L1 is used naturally (i.e. private speech, or humor) the features of the activity or verbal interaction invites the L1 for a specific function” (p. 1658)
- c) Students have different skills and different level of knowledge. Students need to learn how to work with their classmates, the teachers must use techniques and select activities and roles to secure the interaction and participation of the students encouraging the use of L2 during the discussions and group talk necessary during the group work
- d) It is important to stablish that there is not enough research on this topic regarding the students of superior education, some of the research found corresponds to primary (Bane and Kitila, 2003; Taşçı and Aksu, 2020; Yavuz, 2012) , secondary (Sondary and Febryanti, 2021); high school grade (Rance-Roney, 2010; Chang, 2011; Tajgozari, 2017), but according to the results, it can be inferred that the use of L1 does not depend on the students’ age or the academic level teachers are working on. It can be stated that depends more on the proficiency or mastery of the L2 the students have, and the other factors that have been considered during this document
- e) The students’ beliefs or needs about the use of L1 were not included in this research, and it could be another important point of view to be considered in another work to complement the data obtained in this study
- f) We can agree with Sundary and Febriyanty (2021) that from the teachers’ perspectives, it can be summed up that majority of the teachers choose to mix L1 and L2 for language used in the classroom. Students’ L2 proficiency of English is the first factor to consider. When teaching students with low level of English, the students’ first language is more preferable. In addition, to avoid students’ confusion, frustration and demotivation. On the other hand, it is necessary to balance the amount of time of using the L1 and to take in account the lesson plan objectives, among other factors, so as not to overuse the L1 and it may be counterproductive for the learning of the L2.

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