

The Impact of Using L1 in the L2 Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of using the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms, examining both the benefits and challenges it presents for language learners and instructors. The study delves into the theoretical underpinnings of L1 use in L2 teaching, including the role of transfer, cognitive load, and psycholinguistic factors. Through a review of empirical research, the paper discusses how L1 can facilitate comprehension, enhance learning efficiency, and support metacognitive processes, while also acknowledging potential drawbacks such as reduced L2 exposure and dependency on L1. Furthermore, the paper investigates practical strategies for integrating L1 into L2 instruction, considering factors such as learner proficiency level, lesson objectives, and instructional context. The findings suggest that a balanced approach, which strategically combines L1 and L2 use, can optimize language learning outcomes and foster a more inclusive classroom environment.

KEYWORDS

L1 use in L2 teaching; language transfer; cognitive load; metacognition; instructional strategies; language proficiency; inclusive classroom

1 Introduction

The use of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms has long been a topic of debate among language educators and researchers. Traditionally, L2 classrooms have emphasized an immersive approach, minimizing L1 use to maximize exposure to the target language. However, recent research has challenged this paradigm, suggesting that strategic use of L1 can enhance learning outcomes and support learners in various stages of the language acquisition process. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of L1 use in L2 classrooms, exploring its theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and practical implications.

2 Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1 Language Transfer

Language transfer refers to the influence of a learner's L1 on their L2 acquisition. Positive transfer occurs when L1 knowledge facilitates L2 learning, while negative transfer happens when L1 habits interfere with L2 mastery. The strategic use of L1 in L2 classrooms can leverage positive transfer, helping learners make connections between their L1 and L2, thus accelerating the learning process.

2.2 Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive load theory posits that learners have limited working memory capacity, which can be overwhelmed by complex tasks. Using L1 to explain difficult concepts or provide instructions can reduce cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on mastering new language structures and vocabulary without being distracted by the cognitive demands of understanding content in L2.

2.3 Psycholinguistic Factors

Psycholinguistic research highlights the role of metacognition, or awareness and control over one's own thinking processes, in language learning. L1 can serve as a metacognitive tool, enabling learners to reflect on their L2 learning strategies, monitor their progress, and set goals. This self-regulatory capacity is crucial for effective language learning.

3 Empirical Evidence

3.1 Benefits of L1 Use

The incorporation of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) learning contexts has long been a topic of debate among educators and linguists. However, a growing body of empirical evidence supports the notion that strategic use of

L1 can yield significant benefits for language learners. This section explores three key advantages: enhanced comprehension, learning efficiency, and metacognitive support.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that utilizing L1 to explain complex grammatical structures, cultural nuances, or academic content can significantly enhance learners' understanding and retention of information. For instance, when introducing intricate grammatical rules, such as the subjunctive mood in Spanish or the passive voice in English, using L1 explanations can provide learners with a clearer framework to grasp these concepts. Similarly, cultural contexts that are integral to language learning, like understanding idiomatic expressions or cultural references, are often more effectively conveyed through L1, as it allows for direct comparisons and associations with the learners' native culture.

Furthermore, in academic settings where specialized vocabulary and complex ideas are prevalent, L1 can serve as a bridge to facilitate comprehension. By providing initial explanations in L1, educators can ensure that learners have a solid foundation before transitioning to L2, thereby promoting deeper understanding and long-term retention of the material.

Another compelling benefit of L1 use is its potential to expedite the learning process. Cognitive load theory posits that the human brain has limited processing capacity, and when faced with complex tasks, such as learning a new language, cognitive resources can become overwhelmed. By using L1 to clarify instructions, explain concepts, or provide feedback, educators can reduce the cognitive load on learners, allowing them to focus more effectively on the language learning task at hand.

This reduction in cognitive load can lead to faster progression through language levels, as learners are able to absorb and apply new information more efficiently. Moreover, by leveraging their existing knowledge and cognitive structures in L1, learners can more readily transfer these skills to L2, accelerating the acquisition process.

Metacognition refers to one's awareness and control over their own learning processes, including self-assessment, goal-setting, and strategy selection. Research has shown that L1 can play a crucial role in facilitating metacognitive strategies, which are essential for autonomous language learning.

3.2 Challenges of L1 Use

While the benefits of L1 use in language learning are clear, it is important to acknowledge the potential challenges and drawbacks associated with this approach. This section discusses three main concerns: reduced L2 exposure, dependency on L1, and variability across instructional contexts.

One of the primary concerns with using L1 in language learning is that it may limit learners' exposure to the target language. Over-reliance on L1 can result in learners spending less time engaging with L2, which can slow down the development of fluency and accuracy. Exposure to the target language is crucial for language acquisition, as it provides learners with opportunities to practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing in L2, thereby reinforcing their learning and fostering language proficiency. To mitigate this challenge, educators should strive for a balance between L1 and L2 use, ensuring that learners receive adequate exposure to the target language while still benefiting from the clarity and efficiency of L1 explanations when necessary. Another potential drawback of L1 use is that learners may become overly dependent on their native language, hindering their ability to think and communicate directly in L2. This dependency can manifest in various ways, such as constantly translating from L1 to L2 in their heads, relying on L1 cognitive structures when processing L2 input, or avoiding L2 altogether in favor of L1. To address this issue, educators should encourage learners to use L2 as much as possible, even in situations where L1 might seem more convenient or efficient. This can be achieved through language immersion activities, where learners are required to use L2 exclusively, or by setting clear expectations and goals for L2 use in the classroom.

The appropriateness of L1 use varies across instructional contexts, with some settings favoring minimal L1 use, while others may benefit from more L1 integration. For example, in intensive language programs where the primary goal is to immerse learners in the target language and promote rapid language acquisition, minimal L1 use may be preferred. In contrast, content-based language instruction, where the focus is on learning academic content through the medium of L2, may benefit from more L1 integration to ensure that learners can fully comprehend and engage with the material.

4 Practical Strategies for Integrating L1 into L2 Instruction

4.1 Balancing L1 and L2 Use

In the realm of second language (L2) instruction, the integration of the first language (L1) has long been a topic of debate. While some educators advocate for a strict immersion approach, others recognize the potential benefits of strategically using L1 to support learning. Striking a balance between L1 and L2 use is crucial for effective language acquisition. This section explores practical strategies for achieving this balance, emphasizing the strategic use of L1 to scaffold learning while ensuring adequate exposure to L2.

At the outset of a lesson, instructors can leverage L1 to provide clear and concise explanations of new concepts,

vocabulary, and grammatical structures. This approach helps learners grasp foundational knowledge quickly, reducing cognitive load and facilitating comprehension. For instance, when introducing complex grammatical rules or abstract concepts, using L1 can clarify meanings and functions, enabling learners to make meaningful connections with L2. However, it is essential to transition swiftly to L2 for practice and application, allowing learners to internalize and use the target language actively.

Instructors should employ L1 judiciously, reserving it for complex concepts that may pose challenges for learners. By using L1 to elucidate intricate ideas, instructors can ensure that learners understand critical content without getting bogged down by language barriers. Conversely, simpler concepts can be taught directly in L2, promoting language practice and fluency. For example, basic vocabulary and everyday phrases can be introduced entirely in L2, encouraging learners to engage with the language from the start. This differentiation helps learners build confidence in their L2 abilities while providing necessary support for more challenging material.

While L1 can serve as a valuable support tool, the ultimate goal of L2 instruction is to foster proficiency in the target language. Therefore, instructors should encourage learners to use L2 whenever possible, creating an environment where L2 is the primary means of communication. However, when learners encounter difficulties or require clarification, allowing the use of L1 can prevent frustration and enhance understanding. For instance, during group discussions or problem-solving activities, learners can be encouraged to express themselves in L2, with the option to switch to L1 briefly for clarification. This approach maintains the focus on L2 while providing a safety net for learners.

4.2 Tailoring L1 Use to Learner Proficiency

The effectiveness of L1 integration in L2 instruction is highly dependent on learners' proficiency levels. Beginners and advanced learners have different needs and capabilities, requiring tailored approaches to L1 use. This section discusses strategies for adapting L1 use to meet the varying proficiency levels of learners.

For beginners, L1 can play a crucial role in scaffolding learning, providing a bridge to understanding L2. Instructors can use L1 to explain basic concepts, model pronunciation, and offer translations of key vocabulary. This support helps beginners build a foundation in L2, reducing anxiety and promoting engagement. As learners progress, instructors should gradually reduce L1 use, encouraging more independent use of L2. For example, in the early stages, instructors might use L1 to explain simple greetings and introduce basic grammar. As learners become more comfortable, they can practice these skills entirely in L2, with L1 used only for occasional clarification.

Advanced learners, on the other hand, benefit from minimal L1 support, as they have already developed a strong foundation in L2. Instructors can encourage these learners to use L2 for self-expression and peer interaction, fostering fluency and confidence. However, in more challenging tasks or when dealing with nuanced concepts, allowing the use of L1 can facilitate deeper understanding and more sophisticated communication. For instance, during debates or complex problem-solving activities, advanced learners can be encouraged to use L2, with the option to switch to L1 for precise terminology or to clarify intricate ideas.

Teacher	Metaphor	Explanation (key statements)
Pre-service Teacher 1	a starting point	"L1 is the starting point, and FL is the terminal station, because FL is always the final objective you want to reach."
Pre-service Teacher 2	seasonings, (e.g., powdered pepper or chili sauce)	"Some dishes do not need seasonings but some will lose the right taste without them. Analogously, some classrooms do not need the assistance of Chinese, but in some others where students' English are not good enough, the role of Chinese is very important."
Pre-service Teacher 3	a touchpad	"The touchpad is indispensable within a laptop. However, people use it with different frequency."
In-service Teacher 1	last life-saving straw	"It is like when you were almost drowned in a sea, you suddenly caught something. After you have made every effort trying to make sense of something, you fail and the kids cannot understand. At this point you bring in Chinese, and all of a sudden everyone sees the light and relieves."
In-service Teacher 2	a thruster	"Usually in my class, Chinese is used in two types of occasions. One is that you do not have other alternatives. If you use English to illustrate, it will become more complex and inefficient. Then I will use Chinese to proceed. [...] Another occasion is when teaching grammar and difficult sentence structures. I will use English first and then Chinese to consolidate their memories."
In-service Teacher 3	bike stabilizers	"Chinese is like the stabilizers on a kid's bike when the kid is learning to ride. It helps him/her balance and capture the trick of riding."

Instructors should continuously monitor learners' proficiency levels and adjust L1 use accordingly. This involves assessing learners' understanding, fluency, and confidence in L2 and making informed decisions about when and how to use L1. For example, if a group of learners is struggling with a particular concept, the instructor might temporarily increase L1 use to provide additional support. Conversely, if learners are demonstrating strong L2 skills, the instructor can reduce L1 use to challenge them further. The integration of L1 in L2 instruction should always be aligned with lesson objectives, ensuring that it supports rather than detracts from language learning goals. This section explores strategies for aligning L1 use with lesson objectives, emphasizing the importance of clarity and purpose in language instruction.

4.3 Using L1 to Explain Lesson Objectives

At the beginning of a lesson, instructors can use L1 to clearly explain lesson objectives, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. This approach helps learners understand what they will be learning and why it is important, setting the stage for effective instruction. For example, an instructor might say in L1, "Today, we will learn how to use the present perfect tense to talk about experiences. This will help you share your life stories in English." By providing this context, learners can better engage with the lesson and see the relevance of the content. After explaining lesson objectives and introducing new content, instructors should switch to L2 for guided practice, independent practice, and production tasks. This shift ensures that learners have ample opportunity to use L2 actively, reinforcing their language skills. For instance, after explaining the present perfect tense in L1, the instructor can provide examples in L2, guide learners through practice exercises, and encourage them to use the tense in their own sentences. This hands-on approach helps learners internalize the language and develop fluency.

5 Conclusion

The strategic use of L1 in L2 classrooms can have a significant impact on language learning outcomes. By leveraging language transfer, reducing cognitive load, and supporting metacognitive processes, L1 can enhance comprehension, learning efficiency, and autonomous language learning. However, instructors must balance L1 and L2 use, tailor L1 use to learner proficiency levels, and align L1 use with lesson objectives to ensure that it supports rather than hinders language learning. Ultimately, a balanced and strategic approach to L1 use in L2 classrooms can foster a more inclusive and effective language learning environment.

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