

## Keep Your Friends Close

### Saidaly V. Ibarra Hidalgo pleads for the reintroduction of the L1 into the language classroom 211

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Throughout language teaching history, the mother tongue (L1) has played different roles. Thus, it has been labelled the “backbone” of the learning process and exclusive medium of instruction by supporters of the Grammar Translation Method, the “intruder” to blame for the learners’ mistakes by supporters of approaches like the Audio-Lingual Method, or even the “enemy” teachers must fiercely fight against by the radicals who enforced the Direct Method. Today, for many teachers, using their students’ native language is out of question because they work for institutions with official monolingual policies, it represents a source of guilt because it is a “taboo” issue among their colleagues, or it is regarded simply as a way to save time.

It is, however, undeniable that resorting to their L1 is both natural and innate in language learners. Once an individual has completed the slow and complex process of acquiring concepts, structures, sounds, words and other language components, is it really necessary for that individual to make the same effort and take the same time to learn a foreign language (FL)? Teachers may ban the L1 from the lesson, but they cannot do so from their students’ minds. Accordingly, the L1 should not only be accepted but welcomed as a highly valuable asset to be wisely exploited. In doing so, first, both learners and teachers must be aware of why they use the L1, that is, it should be done methodically and with a clear pedagogical purpose. Second, a good balance must be kept between this and other resources so as not to turn the FL classroom into a translation one.

Let us take as an example the teaching of lexical items. It is not uncommon for learners to make use of learning strategies where they engage in L1-FL associations such as making bilingual vocabulary lists, asking their peers for a “translation” of a given word, or taking notes in L1, among others. Language learners already know the lexical system they use to name the world around them and do not need to reconceptualize it; in any case, they need to expand their concepts. When it comes to teaching vocabulary, teachers may take either a monolingual approach (monolingual definitions, context, drawings, mimics, and others) or a bilingual approach (translations between repetitions of FL lexical items, false cognates, morpheme translations, bilingual dictionary, meaning negotiation through discussion in L1). Both are equally valid and effective for different purposes. However, there seems to be a taboo or a misconception around the latter. Some teachers believe resorting to the L1 delays the acquisition of lexical items, while those who timidly resort to the L1 for teaching vocabulary do it inconsistently, either without a teaching purpose, or regarding it as a “way out” when all other techniques prove ineffective.

Contrary to these beliefs and attitudes, there are a number of advantages in exploiting the L1 when teaching lexical items. I once had the opportunity to observe several sessions of an English course where the teacher frequently resorted to the L1. For instance, he had the learners talking in small groups and, while monitoring the activity, he provided the learners with the English words or chunks they did not know and asked him in Spanish. By the end of such activities, he had generated a list in English that included every lexical item he had been asked for and went through it with the whole class; during this stage they would also engage in interesting and enriching discussions on the ways in which both languages differ; these discussions were held in the FL and revolved around a broad variety of issues, from morphological differences to the cultural load of certain words.

Paradoxically, these techniques made the learners less dependent on the L1. The fact that the teacher only made notes in the FL made it clear that he would only resort to the L1 as an assisting tool which by no means would become the main language in the classroom. It was also revealing to note that, by the end of the semester, the learners were asking less for lexical equivalents because they had already acquired solid bases to fully understand the monolingual explanations. This technique also had a positive effect on the learners' fluency: on the one hand, when used during the speaking activities it greatly reduced their stress at facing the new language items and helped them gain confidence; on the other hand, during their metalinguistic discussions, even though they were talking about the L1, the fact that the discussions were conducted in the FL provided an opportunity for further oral production through a meaningful and relevant subject. Finally, this technique also promoted a more authentic, message-oriented interaction; consequently, it called for more complicated language at all levels (lexical, grammatical, syntactic and even pragmatic) and accelerated their learning.

The range of activities that exploit the L1 in the FL classroom is vast: teaching the proper use of bilingual dictionaries, extending concepts by comparing the cultural load of certain words, reverse translating to gain insight into L1 interference through error analysis, using bilingual texts to observe lexical and syntactic similarities and differences, translating short but pragmatically rich excerpts, and many others. Such activities cover a wide scope of language teaching aspects that go beyond language skills and help learners improve their foreign language competence by raising grammar, discourse, sociolinguistic and cultural awareness. Furthermore, bilingual techniques are easily adapted to learner level, needs, language and interests and some can even be carried out where the teacher does not know the L1 of the learners, or in multi-cultural classrooms.

To ban our learners' L1 from the FL classroom would not only deprive us of one of the richest teaching resources we have at our disposal but it would also be fruitless, since resorting to their L1 is a natural impulse. Thus, I would advise those teachers who so fiercely reject the use of the L1 in the language classroom, "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." It is only by observing, studying, and exploiting our rivals that we can defeat them. Only then will teachers realize the learner's L1 is far from being their adversary; it actually is one of our best allies in the teaching-learning process.

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