# L1 use in English Courses at University Level,

## a survey of literature on students and teachers' perspectives

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## Introduction

In EFL university courses L1 use is an issue to consider when learning shifts towards specificity either in the form of focused reading or to get linguistic skills for the world of work.

L1 use contrasts the pedagogy of teaching English through English, whose rationale, in name of proficiency, wishes for implementation by maximizing FL exposure. Generations of FL teachers have shared this prescription, together with phases of guilt, frustration or inadequacy when practice suggested the mother tongue approach (Mattioli, 2004: 22; Macaro, 2001:535).

This Use-English-Only pedagogy has been questioned (Macaro, 2001; Mattioli, 2004; Nation, 2003; Owen, 2003; Wechsler, 1997) and results show L1 can be complementary to foreign language acquisition and not a betrayal to good teaching practices.

Research at university level has also taken into account learning strategies and students' and teachers' opinions (Burden, 2000, 2001; Critchley, 1999; Janulevičienè & Kavaliauskienè, 2002; Kavaliauskienè & Kaminskienè, 2007; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2000). Outcomes are in favour of the *judicious use* (as defined by Atkinsons, 1993, quoted in Mattioli, 2004: 21) of L1 in English language classes, and consider its application an important learning tool.

Advocates of this theory do not deny the benefits of FL exposure and practice, but are aware that a responsible mother tongue use can save classroom time to be devoted to other learning activities.

## L1 use

Everyday practice acknowledges a limited use of L1 in class because in accessing foreign texts "no matter how good the students are… the majority keeps mentally translating" (Kavaliauskienè & Kaminskienè, 2007: 133), or as Wechsler puts it: "learners can not escape the influence of first language" (Wechsler, 1997) and even proficient learners recur to L1 by glossing new FL words (Baker, 2006: 22).

Considering L1 latent in learners' mind in variable degrees, its use in classroom management offers advantages and pitfalls.

The former are affective and practical. Affective reasons reduce psychological barriers in countries where English is considered an imposition for socio-political issues. L1 use, in such cases, makes students realize their mother tongue and their own cultural values are not less worth than the FL ones (Schweers, 1999). Among the practical issues the most important is the teaching of grammar, spelling and phonology, vocabulary, language similarities /differences and cultural issues (Schweers, 1999). L1 also facilitates FL acquisition by helping teachers realize what students have learnt and to explain mistakes or misinterpretations through translation exercise (Baker, 2006: 22).

Drawbacks mainly concern the wrong habit of word-to-word translation which hinders learners' autonomy in FL communication; in such instances this methodology is seen as a shortcut because students may realize that one-to-one relation between L1 and FL does exist (Gabrielatos, 1998: 21-23).

**Students' and teachers' opinions on L1 use**

The bulk of research on L1 use has, to my knowledge, concentrated more on General English and secondary education (see Macaro, 2001: 531-2; Mattioli, 2004: 21-23). In recent years some attention has been paid to this issue at tertiary level teaching, considering both students' and teachers' perspectives (Burden, 2000, 2001; Critchley, 1999; Janulevičienè & Kavaliauskienè, 2002; Kavaliauskienè & Kaminskienè, 2007; Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2000). Schweers and Tang survey university students in Puerto Rican and Chinese contexts, respectively; Burden's questionnaire refers to conversation classes, Critchley's concentrates on students' wants, both in Japanese tertiary institutions; Janulevičienè & Kavaliauskienè's (2002) and Kavaliauskienè & Kaminskienè's (2007) works are based on ESP needs in Lithuanian university courses.

Each research was undertaken to study problems within single learning contexts and sheds light on local needs. I have put these results together to give a synoptic table to guide less experienced teachers (see table 1).

My grid reproduces the entries common in at least three surveys and the percentage of favourable answers given by students (S) and teachers (T).

Kavaliauskienè & Kaminskienè's work has not been taken into account as issues are too specifically related to translation activities, from their article I have used the results cited from a previous research (2007: 134) I have been unable to track.

An item present in many surveys but not considered here concerns the amount of time to be devoted to L1 use; this is an interesting topic to check learners' and teachers' point of view but has not been reported as in everyday university practice no one can think of a L1-time in terms of minutes after which L1 cannot be used.

On row 1 and 2 the cells with the question on *teacher* and *student use of L1* in Janulevičienè & Kavaliauskienè's survey and those on row 3 and 4 in Critchley's on *new words* and *grammar* are linked as the original questions consisted of a single item.

| | Critchley (1999) | Schweers (1999) | | Tang (2000) | | Burden (2000/2001) | | Janulevičienè & Kavaliauskienè (2002) | | Kavaliauskienè & Kaminskienè (2007) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | S % | S % | T % | S % | T % | S % | T % | S % | T % | S % |
| **TEACHER USE OF L1** | 87 | 49 | NA | 50 | NA | 73 | 86 | 83 | 86 | NA |
| **STUDENT USE OF L1** | NA | 88.7 | 100 | 70 | 72 | 73 | 89 | | | 86 |
| **VOCABULARY** | 24 | 22.7 | 12.6 | 69 | 39 | 50 | 70 | 74 | 46 | 74 |
| **GRAMMAR** | | NA | NA | 72 | 39 | 37 | 63 | NA | NA | NA |
| **GIVE INSTRUCTIONS** | 22 | NA | NA | 6 | 6 | 30 | 65 | NA | NA | NA |
| **TESTING** | NA | 1.4 | 0 | NA | NA | 18 | 24 | 9 | 21 | NA |
| **EXPLAIN A TASK** | 8 | NA | NA | NA | NA | 24 | 52 | NA | NA | NA |
| ***DIFFICULT CONCEPTS*** | NA | 86.2 | 22 | 48 | 44 | NA | NA | 72 | 90 | 90 |
| **L1/L2 DIFFERENCES /*RELATION*** | 12 | NA | 2.5 | NA | NA | 53 | 63 | NA | NA | 55 |
| **COMPREHENSION** | 29 | 20.2 | 10.4 | 69 | 39 | 43 | 56 | 55 | 46 | NA |
| **RELAX** | 2 | 5 | 15 | 8 | NA | 61 | 78 | 34 | 21 | NA |

**Tab 1: synopsis of data of students' (S) and teachers' (T) perceptions on L1 use**

Results show the interviewed students and teachers seem favourable to L1 use in terms of explanation of grammar, vocabulary items, difficult concepts and for general comprehension. Both agree to avoid mother tongue in testing but seem better disposed to its use to build a relaxed environment and for contrastive analysis in linguistic/cultural matters. These outcomes may reflect different ideas on learning, namely short term for the students, whose life-span, one can imagine, does not go beyond the lesson and/or the end-of-course examination, and longer term for the teachers, whose pedagogy aims at making students proficient language users. They are nevertheless important to build learner-centered courses which consider methods and students' needs and wants.

**Conclusion**

In the reviewed literature students seem to prefer L1 use and teachers subscribe to the *judicious use* of mother tongue. At university level, where language specificity is higher, it can save time and increase students' motivation. In such cases it can be considered an important learning device to suggest "equivalence" or as a medium to avoid the teacher playing like "a contortionist" in the struggle of keeping away from a simple L1 explanation (Cole, 1998). Moreover, acquiring the habit

of codeswitching can prepare learners to the world of work where this ability will serve everyday interaction (meetings, phone talks, e-mails) with foreigners or in contexts where two languages are commonly used in the same workplace on a daily basis (see Cheng & Mok, 2008; Chew, 2005; Li & Mead, 2000; Louhiala-Salminen & al., 2005).

What is up to now lacking is a broader research to establish parameters to build a framework of "principled use" by comparing results from different countries and from different learning situations. To make comparison easier, questions should have the same items and the research should take into account the learning group e.g. monolingual or multilingual; the teacher, that is native or non-native speaker; it should also consider two basic questions: 1) "when?" and 2) " what for?". Questionnaires should be administered twice to the same group, at the beginning to check learners' opinions and at the end of the LSP course to evidence the efficacy of L1 use. A version with yes/no answers could do at the beginning of the course, whereas one with multiple choice answers could serve the end-of-course survey.

My suggestion is to use L1 with an homogeneous group as concerns the learning outcomes and the language specificity. This should be possible with the class attending the same university subjects or having common learning aims, and not as is the case in larger Institutions where teachers lecture an audience reading different majors.

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