

A Reflection on Using the L1 and L2 in EFL/ESL Class

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Abstract

The application of the mother tongue in English teaching has long been the focus of debate among educators. Understanding the beliefs of English teachers is helpful for English teachers to realize effective teaching and effective education, and training. This study intends to reflect on whether English teachers use their mother tongue to teach English in class, and the different teaching results brought by using L1 or L2 to teach English. The language used by teachers in classroom teaching is known as “medium of instruction”^[1]. In English classroom teaching in China, the use of medium instruction can be divided into three types: English, the combination of English and Chinese, and Chinese. English teachers often think that the use of media language in the classroom will greatly affect the students’ English learning. Therefore, there are two views on the use of the medium of instruction: one is to advocate the use of English teaching, and the other is to advocate the proper use of the mother tongue in English classes. These two conflicting views put English teachers in a dilemma. The paper enables teachers to better understand the influence of belief on teaching, and provides some reasonable suggestions and a basis for improving teachers’ professional quality.

Keywords

Mainland China; English teacher; L1; L2

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1. Introduction

Some studies have investigated the English teachers’ attitudes towards the use of learners’ mother tongue^[2]. However, few studies have investigated the relationship between teachers’ attitudes towards the use of the first language and the actual function of classroom teaching. In the context of teaching in mainland China, most English teachers are not native speakers of English, and the learners’ oral English and listening skills are relatively

poor. Should the first language be used in English classroom teaching? If so, how often should teachers and students use their native language? If you avoid using the first language, will it help to improve students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills?

As language teachers, our teaching goal is to make students learn to use L2. For our teachers’ own teaching process, L1 can be used as a teaching tool to achieve the teaching goal of L2. What we should consider, then,

is how professional English teachers and educational institutions view the historical use of L1. At the same time, it is necessary to consider our understanding of L1 usage and the evolution of how we have used it over the years ^[3] to determine the number and function of L1 in ESL environments such as English immersion.

This article will analyze and critically reflect on the above problems based on the literature, and talk about my own beliefs based on my own learning and teaching experience, as well as what I should try or improve in the teaching methods in the future to help teachers and students improve in English learning.

2. Literature review

Since the end of the 18th century, some scholars have advocated that English classroom teaching should focus on grammar and translation, and generally use the first language for teaching. Students' classroom learning activities are mainly to practice and consolidate the learned rules and vocabulary through the mutual translation between their mother tongue and English. This method only focuses on the study of language knowledge and does not pay much attention to using the language in real communicative situations ^[4]. Hence, Cook and others advocate that English teaching should be widely avoided in learners' first language, so that students can get as many communication opportunities as possible.

When we think about how we learned our first language, we begin by listening and imitating, and when we learn a second language, it's more or less similar to how we learned our first language. Therefore, Krashen ^[5] believes that in the process of learning a second language, teaching in the mother tongue should be minimized. If the teachers use their mother tongue too much to organize teaching activities, they are actually depriving language learners of many valuable opportunities for second language input. Brown also believes that language acquisition is actually a subconscious activity that can only be realized through the interaction of the second language.

Ellis believes that the use of the first language in the classroom is negative because the characteristics of the use of the first language will be transferred to the second language, and learners are likely to confuse the

two languages in the learning process, which hinders the learning of the second language. Some learners, especially adults, even think that it is a waste of time to talk with teachers in their native language in class instead of with native speakers. Krashen also pointed out that "people who learn foreign languages basically do not follow the route of acquiring their mother tongue." Therefore, the use of L1 should be minimized in the learning process.

However, not all researchers support teaching only in a second language in the classroom. Many students in English classes did not have a common mother tongue in the past, and they came from different countries and regions, and the teachers could not speak the students' first language, so they could only teach them in a second language ^[6]. Monolingual teaching loses its appeal. Therefore, many researchers believe that learners' mother tongue can be used to assist the teaching of the second language, such as grammar point explanation, language analysis, or classroom management. The use of the first language in classroom management can help teachers and students to create a more cohesive and relaxing classroom, which is conducive to improving students' classroom learning efficiency. According to Nunan and Lamb ^[7], it is practically impossible for learners to completely avoid using their first language in the process of learning a second language, especially for students with a low level of the second language. When foreign language teachers are teaching a second language in their native language, they often feel guilty and think it will hinder students' learning. However, in fact, Copland and Neokleous think it is unnecessary to completely exclude the use of the first language and as long as it is used correctly and appropriately, the first language can actually promote the second language learning of students.

In addition, Januleviciene and Kavaliauskiene then pointed out that no one would argue that human thinking mode is formed by the first language, and the first language always interferes with the foreign language. Auerbach also seems to support this view in her article, holding that students do not consider using a second language at the very beginning, and we should allow them to gradually explore and use a second language based on the basic ideas of using a first language.

3. Reading reflection

As for whether a teacher should teach in the mother tongue or in English in an EFL class, many experts have only outlined some basic arguments for using the mother tongue in a second language class, with some opposing and some in favor. Some ESL/EFL experts support the use of the mother tongue, although some are against it. In this section, I will talk about English teachers' language proficiency, teaching ability, and the relationship between the frequency of L1 in the classroom and teaching results.

3.1. English proficiency and teaching ability

We know that most English teachers around the world use English as their second or third language, not their first language. Namely, the English level of English teachers in each country is uneven, and some English teachers may not be up to the standards of some relevant jobs. Cullen points out that teachers with poor or unskilled oral English will encounter some difficulties in classroom teaching, such as guidance, questioning, explaining the meaning of words, and answering students' questions. A teacher who lacks English language skills will have a severe lack of authority and confidence in the classroom, which will affect his or her performance in all aspects. For non-native English teachers, language competence is always the cornerstone of their professional confidence^[8].

In addition to the teachers' language ability, teaching ability is also an important part for the second language teachers. The ability to teach English through English requires a series of related considerations, because in language teaching, language is both the content and the means of teaching. Language knowledge and ability are the core of a language teacher's professional identity. However, language ability and teaching ability are not the same thing. The distinction between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge and competence is defined as the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge, which is described by Prodromou as involving at least three areas^[9]:

- (1) Knowing about and how to use the target language.
- (2) Knowing about and how to call in a culturally appropriate way.
- (3) Knowing about and how to behave appropriately in the target language.

In teachers' teaching courses, the difference between content or declarative knowledge and pedagogical or procedural knowledge depends on how the content is presented. For example, grammar class can be used as both content knowledge and teaching knowledge. Teachers choose different teaching methods according to different teaching topics, and the teaching effect will be different. Therefore, we should analyze the language ability and teaching ability of the teacher before considering whether to use English in the classroom.

3.2. The frequencies and models of L1 use in the EFL classroom

In a study by Yan et al.^[10], they found that the Chinese students significantly increased the frequency of using L1 in class from junior high school to senior high school, because most students were preparing for the national college entrance examination. Since this test does not test spoken English, and the proportion of the score of listening is lower than that of reading and grammar, the use of L1 will increase.

In addition, the use of the mother tongue actually provides security for students, and this security can enhance their self-confidence. On this point, Auerbach claims that people have gained a sense of security since they began to learn their first language in a natural environment. This sense of security matches the life experience of learners and allows them to express themselves. If we give students such a sense of security in English classes, learners will be willing to try and take risks in English learning. In fact, some students are so shy and anxious in English as a foreign language that they feel embarrassed using English, especially when they make mistakes in English. In this case, L1 can help them; the students will feel more comfortable, so they will finally have the confidence to use English.

However, Swain et al.^[11] investigated the frequency of L1 used by students in classroom communication in another study, and found that the frequency of L1 used by students with low levels was higher. This is completely contrary to the above-mentioned results that Chinese students use L1 higher in high school than in middle school. In fact, the frequency of L1 used in class, whether in junior or senior grade, is not affected by language proficiency, but by students' belief in English practice

opportunities. As mentioned above, some students and teachers are inclined to take exams, while some students are unwilling to use English for personality reasons. Hence, learners' use of L1 and L2 varies greatly in different teaching contexts, so there is no best or most perfect learning mode.

4. Practical experiences reflection

From an English learner to an English teacher, my learning experiences and teaching experiences will bring me a lot of thinking. The time that the Chinese students spend on English learning from childhood to graduation is more than any non-English-speaking country in the world, maybe, but their English level is still lower than that of any other country in the world. According to official IELTS data in 2017, mainland Chinese candidates ranked 34th in the type of A (academic) test among the global sample of 40 countries and regions, and 35th in the type of G (general) test. In the 2017 TOEFL test, mainland Chinese test-takers ranked only joint 111th out of 169 countries in the world. With a population of 1.4 billion and an economy that has grown rapidly over the past few decades, China has plenty of job opportunities. So, for many Chinese, English is just a threshold for selecting jobs and a skill they can forget once they get the certificate.

According to the report written by Xu ^[12] after his investigation in the first, second, and third-tier cities in mainland China, English is the major of basic English teachers (80%), followed by education/psychology (10%) and other majors (9%). Foreign language school teacher of the highest academic degree, all teachers have bachelor degree or above, including master's degree (or above) of the proportion is as high as 29%, teachers training institutions of teacher education overall level minimum, about a quarter of the teacher education in the college (and below), elementary school and junior high school teacher ratio were 88% and 96% respectively. According to the survey, 56% of the basic English teachers can teach in English. Whether they can teach in English is obviously related to their educational background, the level of their city, and the type of school they are in. The proportion

of teachers with master's degree (or above), bachelor's degree, and college degree who can teach in English is 64%, 59% and 39%, respectively. The proportion of teachers in first, second, and third-tier cities who can teach in English is 69%, 60% and 35%, respectively. Among schools in different categories, teachers in foreign language schools were the most able to teach in English (79 percent), followed by training institutions (59 percent) and primary schools (56 percent). Only 33 percent of teachers in general secondary schools were able to teach in English. In China, there are no spoken English tests and few listening tests, so most English teachers focus on grammar and reading and use Chinese in class. Therefore, it is interesting that many English teachers in China can become English teachers without the ability to teach in English. To sum up, I think that maybe this is one of the reasons why Chinese students have low speaking scores in IELTS. As English teachers, we should first ask ourselves to reach a certain level of language ability, and then know that we have the responsibility to help students get a higher score in such examinations as IELTS. Of course, while helping students, teachers can also improve their language skills.

Although there is no perfect answer to whether to use L1 or L2 in ESL and EFL classes, I personally prefer to use L2 if the students can accept it. Ellis ^[13] also recognized that the use of L1 or L2 sometimes depends on the teaching context, but he supported teachers to teach in English and encouraged students to communicate in English. They can also use L1 or allow students to use it when they think it might be beneficial to use it for a specific purpose. I quite agree with this view, because in the social context of English teaching in mainland China, oral English is not tested in the exam, and many students just want to get high marks in the exam, so we have to pay attention to the exam results, and will put more emphasis on the teaching of reading and grammar. However, in the future teaching process, I will use L2 to teach. When I need to explain some complicated grammar or sentence structure, I will switch to L1. I should not only pay attention to the examination result, which doesn't include the oral English test, but also to the application of English in real life.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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